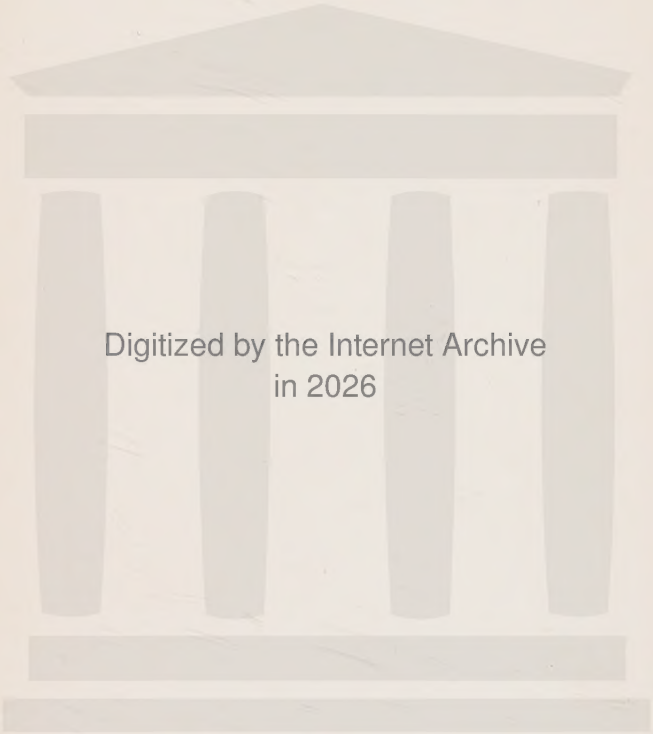
School of Theology at Claremont
1001 1407935

The Library

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT

WEST FOOTHILL AT COLLEGE AVENUE
CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

Texto 926


Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/commonwealthofre0000tgse

"Preachers of To-day"

THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY

EDITED BY J. STUART HOLDEN, M.A.

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE REDEEMED

T. G. SELBY

"PREACHERS OF TO-DAY"

EDITED BY

REV. J. STUART HOLDEN, M.A.,

VICAR OF ST. PAUL'S, PORTMAN SQUARE, W.

Each Volume Cloth Gilt, 3s. 6d. net.

CHRIST AND EVERYDAY LIFE. [*Ready.*
By Rev. W. E. CHADWICK, D.D., B.Sc.

THE FEAR OF THINGS. ,,
By Rev. JOHN A. HUTTON, M.A.

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE REDEEMED. ,,
By Rev. T. G. SELBY.

THE EXCHANGED CROWNS. ,,
By Rev. A. ROWLAND, D.D.

THE INEVITABLE CHRIST. [*Sept.*
By Rev. Canon F. B. MACNUTT, M.A.

THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH. [*Shortly.*
By Rev. R. C. JOYNT, M.A.

HERE AND HEREAFTER. ,,
By Rev. J. E. WATTS-DITCHFIELD.

THE CHRISTIAN STANDPOINT.
By Rev. J. M. E. ROSS, M.A.

Other Volumes in this Library will be announced from time to time; full particulars may be obtained from the Publisher.

LONDON: ROBERT SCOTT.

"PRESENTATION COPY."

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE REDEEMED

BY THE REV.

T. G. SELBY

AUTHOR OF "THE GOD OF THE FRAIL"
"THE STRENUOUS GOSPEL" ETC.

LONDON: ROBERT SCOTT
62, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.
NEW YORK: GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
MCMXI

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

JUST prior to his death Mr. Selby wrote in answer to my invitation, cordially expressing his willingness to contribute to *Preachers of To-day*. Before, however, this purpose could be carried out he was called hence to receive the Master's reward for long and faithful service; and this present volume has been compiled by his devoted wife from sermons preached during the last period of his ministry. They will be recognised by those who have long appreciated Mr. Selby's mediation of the Evangel as being amongst his strongest utterances, and I doubt not but that their perusal will put many a preacher under new indebtedness to him, who "being dead yet speaketh."

J. STUART HOLDEN.

CONTENTS

PAGE

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE REDEEMED . . 1

"The common salvation."—JUDE 3.

THE KINDRED FAITH 15

"My true child after a common faith."—TIT. i. 4 (R.V.).
"To them that have obtained like precious faith with us."
—2 PET. i. 1.

INESTIMABLE LOVE 28

"Thy loving-kindness is better than life."—PS. lxiii. 3.

THE AFFINITY FOR GOODNESS 45

"I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant; for I do not forget Thy commandments."—PS. cxix. 176.

THE MENTOR OF IMPERFECTION 59

"Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye are otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you: only, whereunto we have already attained, by that same rule let us walk."—PHIL. iii. 15, 16 (R.V.).

THE RESENTMENT OF SIMPLICITY 74

"Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and recover the leper."
—2 KINGS v. 11 (R.V.).

CONTENTS

PAGE

THE DIVINE ENDUEMENT OF HOPE . . . 90

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost."—ROM. xv. 13.

GOD'S POWER IN THE PASSIVE GRACES . . 104

"Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness."—COL. i. 11.

ELECT THROUGH PAIN 115

"I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."—ISA. xlviii. 10.

THE REALMS OF COMFORT 128

"Walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost."—ACTS ix. 31.

THE MINISTRY OF THE SPIRITUAL . . . 142

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness."—GAL. vi. 1.

THE PRIMEVAL SOUL-SLAYER 155

"He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth."—JOHN viii. 44.

RELIGION AND INTELLIGENCE 171

"When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side."—MATT. xiii. 19.

CONTENTS

PAGE

INCOMPLETE CONVERSIONS 186

"But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it: yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended."—MATT. xiii. 20, 21.

THE HIGHER FATHERHOOD 200

"When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up."—PS. xxvii. 10.

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE REDEEMED

I

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE REDEEMED

"The common salvation."—JUDE 3.

THAT the rights and privileges of the children of Abraham, both secular and spiritual, were a common possession was a truth suggested and confirmed by all the early incidents of Jewish history. The favour God showed to the twelve tribes in their diverse and ever-changing fortunes was an impartial inheritance. In the days when manna fell round about the camp in the wilderness accumulation was impossible, because the lavish supply came afresh with the morning dawn, and that which was kept became corrupt—all were placed on the same footing. It was out of the power of any one man to annex the great essen-

tial of daily life. The twelve stones in the bed of the Jordan were the signs of the right of each tribe to a place in both the service and recompense of the Covenant. All suspicion of preference or prejudice was ruled out by submitting the name of each tribe and family to the arbitrament of the lot. Then the ransom of the first-born from the service of the tabernacle by a sum which was never to vary from the very beginning taught the worth of each saved life before God. Other gifts and offerings were proportioned to the means of the individual, costlier sacrifices being asked from the rich and those in high places. But this special regulation which preceded all the service of the tabernacle asserted the equal religious worth of every soul, family, and tribe before God.

By the redemption of the Cross God brings us back into the nursery and treats us after the analogy of children who have done neither good nor evil. He puts the disgrace of our ill-sustained responsibilities into oblivion, and gives us a fresh start: and we only leave this nursery in which we are under a common rule of privilege and dispensation of indulgent fondness with our exodus from life. The universality of all the privileges of grace is stamped on the commission Christ gives to His servants. The gospel is preached to every creature under heaven, and the salvation is common.

The salvation is common because it deals with the same age-long, far-extending, consolidated entity of evil. It lifts from the depths of the same shame and peril. We are accustomed to make many distinctions of detail in sin of which God perhaps takes little or no account. Sin, as we reckon it, is separable into independent parts, some of which are worse than others. But God does not thus judge things. The one deep unseen root of sin is in us all. The native fishermen of the coasts of our Eastern colonies were once in the habit of grappling for the submarine cables and stealing sections of copper wire, which they could sell for old metal wherever a market offers. The measure of the crime is not determined by the amount of raw material stolen. A man may steal an inch, a yard, or ten miles, and the interruption to communication will be just as serious. And when an expedition has to be sent a thousand miles to repair a cable it makes comparatively little difference to the cost whether an inch or a mile has been stolen. And is it not thus with sin? From the standpoint of social order and human law the form of its outbreak may matter much, but for the ends of Divine Government it matters little whether a man has cherished for an hour a rebellious passion that divides him from God, or sinned against every precept of the Bible. The

disaster is measured by the interruption caused to the great ends of man's creation. It is from an equal guilt and shame and doom that we are ransomed by this common salvation.

The salvation is common because it is rooted in a redeeming sacrifice that is one and indivisible. When the apostle singles himself out from his fellows and exclaims, "Who loved me and gave Himself for me," he is not departing from his habit of thinking of himself as a unit in the aggregate whole. The one view is always completed by the other. Social reformers have argued that whatever is taken away from the use of the individual robs the community at large of its possessions. The virtue of Christ's sacrifice must not be treated after the analogy of a property, for it can never become the perquisite and monopoly of the individual believer. However vast the multitudes who come to trust in its efficacy and make proof of the endless grace which issues from it, its potency does not decline or exhaust itself, for it is so incalculable in the range of its benignity that it is justly described as infinite, and you cannot divide the infinite without making it finite by the process. The New Testament always looks at Christ's sacrifice as a self-consistent and indissoluble whole, availing, in its inviolable integrity, for an undivided race. It cannot be analysed

into parts. Is not this perhaps the true meaning of the Paschal injunction, precept, and symbolic prophecy in one, "A bone of Him shall not be broken"? It is certainly a thought uppermost in the minds of the apostles who gave us the theology of the Cross. The peculiar efficacy of the sacrifice for the redeemed is never asserted apart from the declaration that its efficacy is world-wide. "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." The great sacrifice does save all men from the full brunt of condemnation, otherwise we should be living in a realm overcast by far darker skies. It saves every man from pain, despair, present wrath, into evangelical privilege. He who attempts to divide its efficacy, saying the major portion of Christ's death was for this saint and the minor portion only for yonder reprobate, or to carry his analysis further and say this and that fraction of the meritorious offering was for me and for me only, is offending against the unity of the expiatory act. The sacrifice is ever active and at the same time exhaustless, because it is Divine.

An African traveller tells us that a rude negro tribe is found near the Equatorial lakes, whose custom it is, whenever twins are born, to put one of the two to death. It is feared that children of

exactly the same age may prove antagonistic in destiny, and that Fortune has not sufficient reserves of good things in her treasury to make glad the life of both. The superstition reflects the cramping selfishness and mistrust of benighted minds. Stern theologians of early times have had a conception of Christ's work that is not much better than the savage view of the restricted resources of Fortune. They believe that Christ's sacrifice comprehended an amount of pain that exactly balanced the penalties due to the sins of the elect, and that He did not endure a single pang in excess of this precise requirement. This is making the sacrifice a mere division-sum in arithmetic, and setting aside the fact of a common salvation. For lost and saved alike there is ample bounty in God and unstinted potency in the Divine sacrifice. There is no difference till the upgrowing faith or the overmastering doubt of the soul itself brings it into view, and for that difference we must fall back upon the moral preferences that are coincident with the successive stages in the development of faith. Grace is indivisible. It is not cut up like a French peasant's farm into little plots for his children, till the food raised is insufficient for the needs of a poultry yard. It is a commonwealth that cannot be broken up, enclosed, or alienated to rivals. The

Cross makes a new beginning for the whole human species just as soon as it comes into view, and even before, and he upon whom wrath abides suffers his doom for the brood of sins rooted in that unbelief which persists in presence of the Cross.

3. Salvation is common because it is administered upon conditions which are unimpeachably impartial. It may be argued against this that the terms laid down for those who seek salvation create new inequalities because the capacity for religious faith varies with the individual. The gospel may promise the same experience of blessing to the recipients, but the requirements are much harder for some than for others. The pool of Bethesda may have no scale of fees, but access to its healing virtues is only possible for a fraction of those who lie weltering in its porches. Religion is like our Law Courts, which are nominally open to rich and poor alike, but in which the long purse does much to invalidate the theory. We are told that some men are so poor in moral qualities that we might almost as well bid them fly as command them to repent. Some men, we are told, lack the capacity for religious faith. They are half-paralysed disciples in the school of Thomas the materialist. It does violence to their natures to give themselves up to the will and authority of an

unseen Saviour. And thus, however common the salvation may be in its original purpose, the law of evangelical life gives rise to inequalities as flagrant and grievous as any that are found under the most defective human governments. But is it so in the final issue? Do not repentance and faith admit of degrees in the beginning of the religious history, and is it conceivable that from the man in whom the capacity for these things has been minimised to the point of extinction God will demand the same complete conditions as He may seek from those who are more highly privileged? An impartial judgment is even now interwoven with the ministration of the redemptive gifts. Imperfect human charities and even the State itself help the man who is defenceless in the Law Courts. Is it conceivable that the Divine charity expressed in the common salvation is less perfect than our own? At some stage or other in their history all men become fit to respond in some degree to the message which bids men repent and believe on the Lord Jesus. God cannot finally damn a man for the failure to do that of which he is quite incapable. Personal idiosyncrasies may cause temporary stumbling, but wise and subtle compensations protect the common salvation against the loss of its glorious catholic attribute.

The common salvation puts before all men the

same hope of spiritual excellence, and so justifies the greatness of its claim. It asserts the coequal possibilities of every man, whatever the race to which he belongs. Not only does it open a door of escape from the ruin wrought by sin, but it points out a great highway leading into the highest spheres of spiritual perfection. It is a widespread notion that the Divine impartiality which asserts itself in the gospel ceases when rescue from the slough has been achieved, and that other causes than those of a universal grace come in to determine the higher developments of character. Sanctity is a peculiar gift reserved for select and representative temperaments. Some years ago a writer of the Positivist School said that the ethic of Christianity was perfect, too perfect for the average man or woman; and Christianity is fitted to be the religion only of a very small group of saints. We are not surprised at such a judgment from an unbeliever, but it is depressing to hear Christians say of their comrades who were converted late in life, or who seem to have an incurable crook in the character, "We must be thankful they are saved from the dregs of viciousness. They are not likely to attain much more in the present life. It is a great thing that they have been saved from flagrant animalism, and it is overmuch to hope that high virtue and spiritual refinement will appear

within them. You cannot expect a creature trained amongst bats to soar like a lark." It is assumed that sanctity is three parts the gift of birth and breeding, and the fourth part that indefinable mystery suddenly added to human life which we call Divine grace. But the gospel falsifies our deterministic philosophies. Salvation is not only out of the mire, but into the loftiest excellence reached by the purest and most devoted followers of Jesus. The motley Corinthians are called saints, for one point of the transition through which they are passing may be in the mire, but the other is in the cloud where God dwells and speaks. The race that becomes most godly may be the race which at the beginning gave least promise. The converted cannibal may outshine the easy-going man who has ten centuries of Christian culture in his blood. The unchurched sections of society are again and again brought to the forefront of discipleship. The hand of Divine power is ever leading men out of the thick darkness, and putting them not only on the outskirts of the firmament but in the central constellations.

It is true that in the processes of salvation differences do arise. Evangelical religion passes into individual types. God leads men along varying pathways of experience, and each life seems to receive its own special stamp. But the very aim

of these divergent developments is to serve the purpose of a common salvation. In the complete orchestra you get many modifications of pipe, string, and resonant surface, but these combine to render a common music, touching varying fibres of sensibility in the hearers till the whole body is aflame with a common ecstasy. So the differences which arise in the actual economies of salvation are to minister, if possible, to the help of the whole, and the mystic body grows together into the fulness of Christ. The particular in religious life is made to subserve the common, and the diverse contributes to the impartiality of the kingdom in which a salvation is administered co-extensive in its privileges with the race itself.

The law of differentiation which gives freshness to the world and saves it from a weary iteration, comes into play at a comparatively late stage in the growth of the race and the individual. If you walk through an anthropological museum you will find all divisions of the human family very much alike in skeleton outline. When skin and hair and eyes are wanting, and you have nothing but the framework left, it is difficult for an unskilled man to say which is the Hindoo and which the Caucasian, which the Polynesian and which the negro. Tropical light, without any intermixture of blood, will change a blonde into a brunette in the

course of two or three generations. In the natural history collection bird and reptile are not far apart. And the microscopist tells us that the germ-cell presents no traces of the after differentiations to which it gives rise. For all that he can see to the contrary the germ-cell of bird and beast and man are the same. The differentiations grow out of a tiny nucleus in a film of homogeneous protoplasm. In getting back to the beginnings a close correspondence is found to exist. Now there is a spiritual order which runs parallel to all this. Religious life culminates in complex and beautiful differentiations. The teaching, the discipline, the after experience which contribute to its mature forms, vary in almost every case. But the beginnings of salvation are essentially one. All holiness of character starts on the same plane. There is the closest correspondence in what we may perhaps venture to call the skeleton facts and the germinal elements of spiritual development. The elaboration of specific variations rests on a broad and generic basis. It is of the common salvation that the apostles write.

Would that you could be convinced now that salvation is common, and that because it is common its rights and privileges are yours! This is faith on its human side. You believe in the impartiality of judgment, for God will try

every man without respect of person. But the impartial judgment is only possible because it is preceded by a common salvation. Have courage! Trust Christ's sacrifice. Take all you need, for it is God's will you should do so. A Chinese proverb says: "Do not pull up your stocking in your neighbour's melon-patch, or adjust your hat under his plum tree." The idea is, he may suspect you of stealing melons or plums. On the illimitable veldt you do not need to observe such precautions. If you cross a nobleman's park or venture upon a grouse-moor enclosed with barbed wire you feel timid. You scarcely dare pluck a wild flower or look at a tuft of grass lest some officious keeper should brandish over your head the law of trespass. But when you are on the open common you are bold. You have no fear of being prosecuted for gathering a primrose, a wild rose, or grubbing up a tuft of fern. It is yours in joint privilege with that of your fellow-citizens. You may take its gifts without fear. You are part-proprietor. Now salvation is just like that. Its length and breadth and height belong to us all. The fountain of life is in an unfenced domain, and whosoever will may come. Breathe freely, for the highway along which you move runs over God's common. It is a realm in which private ownership does not count.

In some countries you are apt to think the

people are discourteous because they show little respect of persons. But if you look below the surface you will find that it is a robust and inoffensive independence which grows up out of civic equality. The shoeblack, the carman, the unskilled labourer does not slouch about as if he were dying to find some one to whom he can touch his hat. He is a citizen just as much as an Astor or a Vanderbilt, and he looks it. Have such boldness conjoined with godly reverence in the kingdom of God. You have equal rights. Salvation is a joint heritage, and all its riches are a commonwealth, not a perquisite for one in opposition to the rest, but for each and for all.

II

THE KINDRED FAITH

"My true child after a common faith."—TIT. i. 4 (R.V.).
"To them that have obtained like precious faith with us."
—2 PET. i. 1.

NO candid student of the New Testament records can ignore the fact that Peter and Paul looked at the great Christian verities from different standpoints, although the range of those differences is sometimes greatly overstated. The men were dissimilar in training, experience, and natural temperament, and were sure to diverge in almost everything but that in which the Spirit of God expressly made them one. Yet in writing to Titus we find Paul saying substantially the same thing as Peter when he addresses the Jews of the Dispersion. Titus was a presbyter in Crete, subject to the authority of the apostle of the Gentiles. His training had not been at the feet of Gamaliel, and he had been led into the religion of Jesus by a different pathway from that of his leader Paul. He was a pure Greek, and yet Paul sees nothing

alien in the quality of his faith. For an apostle who was not only an unmixed Israelite, but who had been arrested in his persecuting zeal by a miraculous vision, and for a Greek, the son of a Greek whose experience of supernatural manifestations was limited, faith was one and the same virtue. And this is affirmed yet more strongly by Simon Peter. His second epistle was destined for the same readers as his first—the Jews of the Dispersion, who had not personal contact with Jesus Christ in the flesh and little or no opportunity of observing miracle. And yet the chief apostle affirms that their faith was akin to his own. Christ's righteousness is the atmosphere which inspheres and quickens it, and for all spiritual ends it is just as effectual in its working. The faith was one, although apostles and their converts looked at the gospel from different standpoints and had no systematised teaching or elaborated creeds.

This common faith takes its rise in common conditions of life. It is not an exotic which thrives only in the rare soil of an apostle, and which needs a temperature of miracle for its healthy development, but for which no foothold can be found in average human nature. Whilst soil, climate, ocean-currents, gulf-streams, the flight of birds, and the commerce of the nations determine the distribution of plants, such causes

are only partial in the changes they bring to pass. There are hidden nooks favoured by some rare wild flowers which seem to say, "I will stay here, and I defy removal. If I am carried hence I shall die." The most delicate and delightful fruit the earth yields grows within a restricted area of a few hundred square miles. Some years ago a nobleman spent thousands of pounds in trying to rear it in his hothouses, but failed. Faith is not like that. It is not a product which flourishes only in the souls of those who were the personal companions of Jesus, and in the singular temperature of the first century of the Christian era. Every heart may offer it a fertile field in which it can thrive and bring forth fruit unto perfection, if that heart be but broken and contrite. It will flourish as triumphantly in the soul of a mathematician as in that of a shepherd, and may find as congenial a home in the nature of a suspicious Chinaman as in that of a Fijian. Ranker weeds may grow in some temperaments and races than in others, and a harder surface may need to be pulverised by sharp disciplines. But human nature everywhere has elements which make faith possible. He who has proved the power of faith to its last possibility began where we have to begin. In the natures of Paul and John, Polycarp, Augustine, Ambrose, St. Francis, and St. Catharine

as much needed to be done as in yours and mine. As lowly a submission was required, as sharp a self-emptying, as profound a prostration of all the powers before God. Human nature cannot develop saving faith of its own innate intent or virtue, but it can offer everywhere the underlying elements in which this Divine gift strikes its root.

The tendency to believe is inborn and highly organised. Human life would be impossible without it. A child of tender years is eager to accept everything he hears, and is slow to draw the line between fact and fiction. It is this instinct which opens the gateways of knowledge to the soul. We come into the world with an insatiable and promiscuous appetite to absorb and assimilate whatever may present itself to us. At the first no supernatural fact staggers us. After a time this instinct is held in restraint by the power of rational judgment, and scepticism arises even in the most credulous and benighted communities. Men find out that some of their guides speak without a sense of responsibility, and some of them also lack sincerity. When they have been repeatedly and cruelly deceived this instinct ceases to act in the miscellaneous social relationships of life, and limits itself to the family circle or to the spheres of friendship. Even the gods disappoint those who look to them for secular favours, and every idola-

trous race has its groups of doubters. When the gods disappoint men of high ethical standards the thwarted worshipper acquires the habit of blaming himself for his own unworthiness rather than impeaching the power and fidelity of the gods, and so the instinct is saved from destruction. It sometimes sleeps unhurt till the gospel of redemption is preached. Christianity takes hold of this propensity to believe when it is not hopelessly paralysed, directing it aright and saving it from disappointment and frustration. The gospel, when preached with power sent down from heaven, spiritualises a universal instinct and makes it of saving potency within the soul. The faith that removes mountains and kindles a Divine charity within the soul may be traced back to its beginnings in this primitive instinct which we all possess in common.

But this natural instinct is not of itself sufficient to produce saving faith. It must needs be stimulated and spiritualised by help flowing into the human soul through inscrutable channels. The ministry of the Spirit which fosters this disposition and builds up a saving habit out of the first struggle to believe, is impartial and all-embracing. The world-wide operation of the influences out of which common faith arises is an essential part of the doctrine of redemption. The philanthropy

which seeks to save the perishing millions of a famine-stricken empire is inadequate if it simply sends cargoes of wheat or rice to the ports of entry, whilst those who die in the wasted interior are cut off from these supplies by lack of railway communication and the means of transport. The bounty which provides the grain is equally concerned to carry it to the far-off homes of the people. And God must establish in the midst of universal man the lines of faith through which the benefits of redemption can be brought home to those who are in need. It is true some Christians in every age seem to have an extraordinary endowment of faith, but it is bestowed for special forms of service, and, after all, is a specialised development of the common faith, stimulated to its victories by the mystic and kindly atmosphere which encompasses all believing souls alike. There are kindred traits, a strong family likeness in the faith of all who belong to the one family in heaven and earth. St. Peter connects the gift of a like precious faith current in all the early communities of Christ's disciples with the righteousness of God our Saviour; and righteousness is always impartial, knowing nothing of respect of persons. When the satrap of Egypt feasted his brethren he heaped special marks of his favour upon Benjamin, but that did not imply he starved

the rest. There is a common possibility of faith fixed within the hearts of all men.

The common faith exercises itself upon the self-same truths which meet a world-wide need of the soul. The mind of the primitive believer was occupied with a group of elementary facts, the full doctrinal interpretations of which had not yet become complex or abstruse. For the philosopher and metaphysician subsequent elaborations were necessary, but the Creed of the Churches in which the apostles laboured was compact and consisted of few articles — the death and resurrection of Jesus, His ascension to the right hand of power, the gift of the Spirit, and a judgment to come, of which He was the arbiter. It is not at all sure the apostles would have accepted the later creeds if they could have been formulated three centuries earlier and submitted to their judgment. Such developments of statement were necessary to satisfy thinking minds within the Church when Alexandrian philosophers and Roman jurists flocked into its fold, but it is open to question whether any apostle but John and Paul had aptitude for such statements. The elementary facts of the gospel received a subsequent setting, coloured by the training and education of the Greek and Latin fathers, and influenced more or less by their personal idiosyncrasies; but the

things which absorbed the soul in its first act of faith were few. The electricity which is brought into the many buildings of a city from a power-station, when it reaches the eye may be various in tints. It may glow under the similitude of a torch, an old-fashioned candelabra with imitations of wax candles, or in a simple bulb of uncoloured glass. But it comes from the same source, whether it illuminates the mill where the workers toil, or sheds many-coloured splendours in the palace where the royalties of Europe dine. The vitalising and illuminating power of faith, whatever the setting of the century or the bent of the mind in which it appears, arises in the same group of historic facts which lend themselves to the very simple doctrinal interpretations. Any one either denying or overloading into obscurity these simple foundation facts makes a common faith impossible. Faith exercises itself on a limited series of historic incidents, behind which are common principles of world-wide validity. Faith may frustrate itself and pass into pedantry and egoism when it strains after the abstruse and the speculative. When we elaborate our articles of faith, faith is apt to lose its kindred elements and become the watchword of the specialist. No stress of discipline or controversy can destroy the faith which occupies itself with the first essential facts.

This common faith implies a sympathising fellowship. The gift is not only exercised for the common good, but brings with it the reciprocating influence of mind upon believing mind. There is an interchangeable efficacy in this subtle virtue which we cannot trace or define. The faith of those who carried the man sick of palsy into the presence of the Divine healer reflected itself into the soul of the sufferer himself, and helped the process of his redemption. As rivers flow into the sea, and the sea gives back to the rivers, such is the relation between the faith of the individual and that of the community with which he is incorporated. Faith creates a psychic and far-reaching atmosphere that it is impossible to track or analyse. The power of the individual to believe in Jesus Christ is raised or lowered by this common action. He who adds alien elements to his faith is an enemy of this fellowship, for he may render it incapable of blending with the faith of others. We may ask too much of our neighbours. If I am asked to believe what the apostles believed and what they demanded from others in the simple appeals from their lip and pen which have come down to us, I am content, and my faith will coalesce with theirs and with that of God's chosen people everywhere. The faith that is common must be of universal currency, and the more we

add to it the greater is the danger of overloading and destroying it.

Faith is always pregnant with the same potencies, for God accords to it the same impartial response in every man. He does not accept one man's faith to the disparagement of his neighbour's, or recompense it with more lavish gifts. Of course great faith is of more value than little faith, but both belong to the some category of values. Faith borrows nothing of its essential and prevailing virtue from the idiosyncrasy of the man himself. It makes all those who exercise it partakers of the same righteousness. It does not clothe one man with fine linen and another with coarser textures. It has the same reconciling efficacy in the heart of a backslider to-day as in Simon Peter when he met his risen Lord in the morning twilight by the lake. It produces the same transitions, fosters the same experiences, leads forth to the same victories, awakens the same songs. It has the same unfailing value throughout the kingdom of God. The fancy of primitive man saw in the planets different elements from those of which our earth consists. Mars was fire, Jupiter wood, and Venus gold. But modern science has taught us that they are made up of the same elements as our own earth, some of them gaseous and some solid. We look at the apostles set high in the firmament with a lustre

that shines across the long centuries. We remember the great orbits through which they moved. We contemplate the sufferings of the martyrs and are astonished at their fortitude and amazing defiance of pain. We study the lives of the saints and wonder at their unworldliness and devotion to God. But when we analyse the apostle, the martyr, the saint, we find within them the same elemental trust in God. Their faith did not differ greatly, except in degree, from our own. Faith, if it includes the few saving essentials which were cherished by the first disciples, has everywhere the same mighty spiritual value. The words "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" are sometimes used as a boastful and schismatic watchword of one religious community against another. But the one faith is a response to the character of the one Lord who both awakens it and stamps it with the authority which gives it currency in His kingdom, and if the faith and the Lord are one, the baptism is not likely to be of defective virtue or significance. Indeed, the baptism derives its value from the one faith which is of equal worth in all disciples. There is kinship between the first trembling struggle of the soul to believe and the last act in which the dying saint calmly commits his spirit into the hands of its Saviour.

St. Peter's words imply that faith is a specific personal possession. Some commentators have assumed that in these words Peter is referring not so much to the individual faith of believers as to the body of doctrine which constitutes the object of a Christian's faith. Such a use of the word is foreign to his habit, and had he been speaking of a deposit of teaching in which they were joint-heirs, he would probably have used other language. Those to whom he is writing belong to a well-defined class. Men know when they have this saving gift, and they know also when they lack it. The hearers of the gospel may grow into faith by unconscious processes, but they do not long remain unaware of that into the grasp of which they have come. The head of an Israelitish family who had entered into the promised land, knew after the lot that he had the rights of ownership, and knew also what his holding was capable of producing. The father of John the Baptist knew when the lot had given him his right of access to the altar of incense, and when he was free to depart to his home. The soldiers who cast lots for the seamless robe knew which of them had become the owner of the coveted raiment. And it is as easy to know the things pertaining to the spirit as to the body. A man knows whether he is poor or rich, unless he is a

miser who cannot believe in his own gold. He knows when he has sufficient food, shelter, clothing. And we know whether we have faith and all the blessedness with which it enriches human life, and whether we have it not. The believing and the unbelieving states are just as boldly divided off from each other as France from Italy and Spain by the ranges of the Alps and the Pyrenees. If you lack this gift seek it, for God's ministry of it has not ceased. He ministers it according to His will, and His will is good.

III

INESTIMABLE LOVE

"Thy loving-kindness is better than life."—Ps. lxiii. 3.

"SKIN for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life," said the cynical tempter. It scarcely needed the intelligence of a fallen angel to formulate a verdict of that sort. That the majority of men put the highest conceivable value upon life is a self-evident proposition. The price a man puts upon his life may vary to some extent with race, religious belief, the measure of his civil liberty, but in nine cases out of ten the variation is one of insignificant fractions. If stocks and shares would maintain the same uniform level of value as life, some of you would experience a sensible relief from your customary cares and anxieties.

This psalm was composed in circumstances that served to illustrate David's own vehement love of life. It was for this he had left behind him household, palace, imperial power, and all the associations of the city that had grown up under his hand.

Do not think David of less noble mould because he fled from the mustering insurgents of his capital. He had a keen, undespairing love of life peculiar to one whose hope is the Lord.

And yet if the love of life had been the only force that moved him it would have sent him bounding like a hart to the forests and fastnesses in which he had defied the foes of his youth. But he lingered as he went weeping up the Mount of Olives. He halted for a time almost in sight of the temple. It is only through a fierce inward struggle that he can bring himself to pass the Jordan. Call it fond and foolhardy if you will. The spell that bound him to the sacred soil was more influential than the fear which incited to flight. God's loving-kindness was more to him than life. If perils should thicken and death should come, he can bear that. He cannot bear the loss of God's loving-kindness, and can scarcely endure even the thought of separation from the scenes in which God's loving-kindness had been so signally displayed in the past, and where every object was a memorial of God's truth and faithfulness.

We may look at life from two points of view, and form some estimate of its apparent value. There is the ideal point of view ordinarily taken by the young. There is the experimental point of view taken for the most part by the aged.

There is the ideal view of the possibilities of life taken for the most part by the young. An ardent imagination not uncommonly clothes life in more lustrous and roseate hues than ever clothe the reality. For the purpose of the comparison made in the text we may accept life at its fancy value. At the outset we will forget the grim, prosy, palpable interpretations to which we are sometimes driven by the actual facts that confront us. For our conception of life we will go to the balmiest and most richly flowered Arcadia of man's imagination. God's loving-kindness surpasses that. If we think of life in its ideal excellence, its loftiest possibilities of pleasure, its most refined activities, its gayest developments, if we contemplate it in the harmony of its collective attractions, God's loving-kindness transcends that in absolute and inexhaustible charm.

For many the chief value of life consists in its ministry to the senses. They prize it because it brings them into touch with nature. Its fascination has a purely physical basis.

The tropic savage is perhaps the most complete representative of this type accessible to us. He is almost entirely a creature of the senses. Now he basks for hours like a lizard in the sun. The forest addresses his ear with the music of its whispered voices. And anon he finds a new exhilaration for

his frame in the race, or dance, or hunt. Life is prized only for its ministry of sight and sound and physical movement and sensation.

Or you may take your type from the vineyards and olive orchards that fringe the Levant. Gleams of year-long sunshine through the thick vine leaves, or the silver-grey canopy of the olives, the play of the breeze from the sea, fern-clad lanes filled with rustic music, the playful interchange of sentiment between those in whom the pulses of existence are in their springtide, this is the perfection of living. No better paradise is asked or sought.

These ideals of a purely naturalistic life have found high favour from time to time in certain sections of English society. Sickly, washed-out copies of these original masters of sensuous living haunt the fashionable drawing-room. The melancholy disciple of what is known as the flesh-and-blood school in Art, Music, Poetry, Decoration, declares that the chief worth of life consists in the power of the educated sense to drink in light, colour, melody.

If, now, we take it in its most etherealised forms of sensuousness, is it not immeasurably inferior in joy-giving value and preciousness to the Divine loving-kindness? The outer frame of things that captivates man's perception is but a fragmentary manifestation of the beauty and beneficence of

God. If the whole is greater than its parts (and nature is one only of God's many gifts), God's love must transcend the life of mere sensuousness which some men declare is the climax of all being. God is higher and better than His best works.

All experience sustains the conclusion. As a matter of fact, these children of the sun and the fruit blossom and the rhythmic movement of life grow into a frightfully ugly and peevish and discontented old age. It is obviously something short of the better part they have chosen. And the pallid copyists of these children of the sun in our own midst do not seem to be a particularly joyful generation. Perhaps our wet, frowning climate revenges itself upon their affectations. It is a somewhat ungrateful task to cherish this naturalistic ideal and to seek to play it out in autumn drizzle, winter slush, and spring east wind. Æstheticism does not make men particularly placid or light-hearted. It deals in sighs rather than in pealing psalms. It feigns the pangs of chronic martyrdoms without the grandeur of the martyr-motive or the swan-song of the martyr-triumph. You might almost read how much better is God's loving-kindness than the life in which the senses are most richly gratified by looking first on the expression of some gorgeously attired high priest of æstheticism as he stares pensively down into his

sunflower, and the expression on the face of some ill-clad penitent from the streets as she turns her glance for the first time to the Cross and reads there the message of God's forgiving favour and goodwill.

To illustrate the unsatisfying character of the purest and most perfect fellowship with nature let me refer you to the words of the late Richard Jefferies. His insight into the glories of the material world was perhaps more complete and versatile than Wordsworth's, and he will occupy a place as a word-painter of field and copse and stream as unique as that of Turner in Art. Hear him as he enters into the spirit of the Spring: "The fly whirls his scarlet spotted wings about and splashes himself with sunlight like the children on the sands. He thinks not of the grass and sun: he does not heed them at all, and that is why he is so happy. He lives without thinking about living, and if the sunshine were a hundred hours long, still it would not be long enough. No, never enough of sun and sliding shadows that come like a hand over the table to lovingly reach our shoulder, never enough of the grass that smells sweet as a flower, not if we could live years and years, equal in number to the tides!" Or hear him again. His last illness has come, and he has been compelled to watch nature through the

window of his prison. "They go on without me. Orchis-flower, cowslip—I cannot number them all. I hear as it were the patter of their feet. They go on and I am no more than the least of the empty shells that strewed the sward of the hill. Nature sets no value upon life, neither of mine nor of the larks that sang years ago. The earth is all to me, but I am nothing to the earth. It is bitter to know this before you are dead. These delicious violets are sweet for themselves; they were not shaped and gifted with the exquisite proportion and adjustment of colour and hue for me. High up against the grey cloud I hear the lark through the window singing, and each note falls into my heart like a knife."

A man who has found all his springs in God can never feel the utter desolation that wails in those dark, sick-hearted words. His joy in God grows with the fading out of the senses. Compare with those words Paul's triumphant exclamation: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day, and not to me only, but to all them that love His appearing."

"Having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better."

Other people value life because of those movements of the intelligence it makes possible. In the

use of our best faculties of thought we experience the thrill of an indescribable satisfaction. A popular writer makes one of his gifted heroines say: "If I could not sing I should want to set fire to a great forest, or to burn down a city, or something of that sort." Behind all high faculty there is a throbbing impulse well-nigh irresistible. The exercise of a great natural gift brings a priceless ecstasy into the nature. For not a few it is the perfection of all life to have a brain through which a rich and full and vitalising stream of thought is always flowing. This does not apply only to people of brilliant parts. In almost every individual there is some secret spring of special gift that gives to life its chief worth. The man of business delights just as much in his organising and administrative dispatch and adroitness as the man of literature or cabinet and council chambers in the gifts that enable him to mould the life of nations. For not a few about us the whirl of movement, the acceleration of the intellectual pulses, the concentrating force of a passionate quest, brings a more bracing atmosphere into the nature than the fashionable paganism which looks upon man as a kind of glorified sponge, whose special function it is to suck up warmth and colour and music. The essential worth of life consists in its activity. Its joy is connected

for many with the higher movements of the mind.

Well, let your life be the life of ideal genius—God's loving-kindness transcends that in the purity of its charm, the strength of its invigorations, and the manifoldness of its joy-creating influence and power. It is a richer inspiration in human hearts than the most vivid consciousness of intellectual power. In all seasons it leads home to the soul an unfailing stream of motive and inward refreshment. The genius of research, statesmanship, poetry, artistic inventiveness, acts under the impact of motives that are both finite and intermittent. I have seen water-wheels in the dried-up river-beds of tropical hills. Long months of drought had wasted away the stream that furnished the motive-power. A few feeble drops of moisture were trickling down the warped and creaky wheel. No single revolution was possible till the monsoon came. The wheel was perfect, the mill well built and well-preserved, but the motive-power had gone for a time. I have also seen streams and torrents and waterfalls tumbling in vast and unceasing volume from the edge of the great snow-fields of Northern Europe. The wheel placed there can never stop for lack of power. So with the life into which God's loving-kindness is always coming in eternal music. In the commonest natures that

loving-kindness awakens something higher even than intellectual swiftness and sympathetic exaltation and the unfailing thrill of genius. It makes men of comparatively inferior clay more than artists and poets and orators in their fine exaltations of thought and passion. Does the worth of life consist in the intense mental movements for which it is the channel? The spring of a swifter and more unceasing movement is to be found in God's loving-kindness. Indeed, it is an astonishment to me that genius keeps active with so little to animate it. I wonder all intellect outside the sphere of religion has not long since become bankrupt for want of motive. I can only explain the persistence of intellectual activity in connection with purely earthly questions on the ground that it is an anodyne in which men find forgetfulness and refuge from the common pains of life.

Some men chiefly prize life because it unlocks to them avenues of power. It fascinates them in proportion to the degree in which they can impose their wills on others. They value their own faculties less because of the pleasure derived from their exercise than as instruments for enforcing their personal ascendancy. Some men seek to assert themselves by brute force, others by climbing into office, others by the nobler methods

of moral and intellectual suasion. It is the supremely pleasant thing with all these to assert their individuality, to assert it sometimes by cruelly immolating the individuality of all the people who are within their reach. They do love life, for death is inability, helplessness, apparent extinction.

The Divine loving-kindness when it comes to men gives them a nobler kind of authority. It enthrones them as kings over a better universe. The man of whose being the goodness of God has become the infinite well-spring moulds for himself a more magnificent empire than conqueror ever carved by the sword. Unless we could think we should leave our mark somewhere, or upon something, how insipid life would be to us. It is a higher thing to influence one man's immortality with the power of God's love than to celebrate the jubilee of a reign over a hundred million souls. No Alexander need ever shed his tear of limitation here. If the value of life is made to consist in its power, God's loving-kindness is better than life.

Others prize life for the human love it makes accessible to them. Some few men and a great many women find the crowning worth of life here. To be denied affection is sheer death for these sensitive, warm-souled creatures. Slight, frigidity, unkind or unjust judgments trouble them more than sickness, misadventure, misplaced invest-

ments. The one sting in death is the loss of affection it seems to entail. The love of wife or child or friend is the one priceless pearl life seems to have given them.

Let life be judged from the standpoint of those who value it for its human affection, and, if the whole be greater than the part, God's loving-kindness must be better than life. The finite love that gives to our existence its amplest enrichment here has its bounds and shallows and limitations. A hundred circumstances may tend to separate us from those best fitted to accord the sympathy we crave. The life most richly filled with love is filled from a spring that sometimes waits long for its mystic troubling. God's love is more than the human love which clothes life with its best worth because it comes to us with all the infinite attributes of God's nature in it. The collective loves of life compared to the loving-kindness of God are but like the spark in a narrow old tinder-box compared to that maze of suns we call the Milky Way. These simple finite loves that give to life its most absorbing charm are but like the reed played by the lonely shepherd on the mountain side. God's loving-kindness is like the great mechanism of harmony into which the strains of all musical instruments are combined and started upon their billowing melodies by one touch.

If God's loving-kindness is better than the ideal life of youthful dreams, it is certainly immeasurably better than the disappointing reality. We have been comparing God's loving-kindness hitherto with the life in which the highest possibilities of human happiness are realised, and we have found that God's loving-kindness transcends even that. But life, as most of us know, is not all that imagination paints it. If God's goodness is better than the bright dream it will need no argument to show that it is better than the dull, sorrowful prose into which the dream almost always lapses. We need not gauge the worth of life by the dejected utterances in the Book of Ecclesiastes. We may venture to take a healthier and more flattering estimate of it than that. The practical life of good-natured and prosperous people has drawbacks and qualifications in it which often lead them to ask, Does not the balance incline towards pain?

Life is a good for which men sometimes lose the keenness of desire. With declining years, if not before, life is apt to flatten down into mere existence. The colour fades, the aroma passes away. It is a pathetic admission that comes from the lips of Barzillai the Gileadite. David wants to reward the kindness the old patriarch has shown him in the days of his calamity and discrownment by

taking him back to Jerusalem to be a guest for the rest of his days at the royal table. The old man replies, "I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil? can thy servant taste what I eat and what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women?" (2 Sam. xix. 35). And there are still Barzillais in our midst, not a few who have lost all appetite for the dainties at life's banquet. Their tastes have been blunted by gathering infirmities, and the wine has lost its fiery enchantment, and the music its rippling sweetness. I once heard a gifted man who suffered from chronic nervous exhaustion say, "I was born tired and have never been able to get rested yet." The disappointments of our forefathers with life may sometimes reappear in the hereditary gloominess and irritability of their descendants. The appalling statistics of European and American suicides prove that men do not always think of life as a prize to which they must cling at any cost. In a great many hearts around us the care for life is slowly dying out. Disappointment has quenched it. We can find Barzillais who are not yet white-headed. We can sometimes find Barzillais who are not yet out of their teens. We may find Barzillais who have scarcely reached their teens. Some statistics of French suicides, published not very long ago, showed that in a

recent year more than a hundred boys under fourteen years of age had committed suicide. The love of life is sometimes quenched by physical pain, by oppression, by disappointment, by nervous dejection, by a depraved and unhappy wilfulness of disposition. When the supposed satisfactions of life prove themselves a mockery, the care for life sometimes passes away.

Who ever heard of a man who revels day by day in the sweetness of God's tender mercy beginning to loathe his life? That will reconcile him to the most evil, impoverished, and pain-stricken type of life. We have heard of diseased and misguided people ending their lives because no gleam of God's loving-kindness seemed to enter them, but never of one doing so who had a sensible experience of that loving-kindness. God's loving-kindness is a gift for which there is a never-failing desire. "When shall I come and appear before God?" "So panteth my soul after thee, O God!" In this gift there is no deadening satiety. A man may taste of life at its best and grow weary of it. The taste of God's loving-kindness vitalises eternal longing within us. It is "better than life."

Life in its earthly form is but a transient good. Under the conditions in which we know it, it lasts at most but fourscore years. Those who have

reached mid-life will see leaves unfold and blossoms open to the sun but thirty or forty times more at the very highest estimate. And the pain of having life cut off at last is in exact proportion to the enjoyment that has been infused into it. But God's loving-kindness is an abiding good. Like gold unharmed by fire it will survive the wreck of whatever is fleeting in our existence, and incalculably enrich and dower us in the life to come. Life is a vapour. But God's loving-kindness is the azure beyond the vapour in which the stars are set, and in that stormless realm my spirit shall be enshrined for ever in its fellowship with the eternal. Life is a dream. But God's loving-kindness is the glittering dawn that shall rush in with music when the dream dissolves. Life is a watch in the night. But God's loving-kindness is the kingdom of millennial day into which my soul shall be summoned by bells and silver music when the watch is past. The days of man's life are swifter than the weaver's shuttle, but God's loving-kindness is the robe of light in which my soul shall be clad when it is thought worthy to stand before the spotless and conquering King. Life is like the blooms of the grass that fade away. But God's loving-kindness is like the stars which one of our astronomers has called the flowers of the sky, the flowers that watch

unchanged through their great epochs the blushing and fading away of all earthly flowers. When life shall yield no added drop of sweetness, when the nectar shall have fled from all the cut blooms of earth, the fountain of God's loving-kindness shall flow through the skies in better and more enduring gifts of life. "Better than life."

Can you set your seal to the Psalmist's witness? Is your spirit consistent with your profession? Are you more eager to possess and retain God's loving-kindness than to possess and retain the best gifts of life? Do you count all things loss so that you may gain this? Are you content to be poorer, less esteemed, less mighty, so that more of God's loving-kindness may be disclosed to your soul? What are you prepared to give for this incomparable treasure, to surrender so that yours may be this pearl of great price?

IV

THE AFFINITY FOR GOODNESS

"I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant; for I do not forget Thy commandments."—Ps. cxix. 176.

THE authorship of this psalm has been assigned to David in his distresses, to a nameless Babylonian exile, and also to some devout Jew who was set at nought by the conquering Greeks. It lacks the characteristic nature-touches of David, and does not fit into any of the episodes of his life; and it is difficult to choose between the alternatives which remain. It must be sufficient to know that it was written by a valiant confessor of pure and undefiled religion in days of reaction and decline. He is cast into hostile surroundings, a victim of long-continued injustice, and is cruelly bruised and battered by the hand of violence. And yet the writer does not regard himself as a faultless hero. Mingled with his endurance of undeserved wrong at the hands of a ruthless world, there is a sense of personal sin.

Like some of us, he feels himself at fault in the sight of God, though it is for his virtues that his persecutors are assailing him. Although in the successive paragraphs of the psalm he, like Job, holds to his integrity through reproach and opprobrium, yet he is not without a sense of error and guilty self-will. Repentance for stubborn moral follies mingles with his appeal for help. It is not for him to impugn those severities of the Divine providence under which he is made to wince, for at times he himself has deviated from the paths of holiness, and whilst still mindful of the things of God, and continually visited by holy memories, needs to be sought and saved.

Such an experience is not uncommon. There are many who cannot charge their own souls with open transgression, and yet do not wish to pose as innocent victims of the ills that befall them. Through the combined influences of moral frailty and dogged ill-fortune they have come into false and painful positions, and can enter into the confession and prayer of the Psalmist.

The Psalmist declares that his folly and wilfulness have put him into a false and incongruous place in life. Like the sheep away from the fold, he is not in the sphere to which he belongs. No refuge of peace opens its portals before him. He is in a barren, pitiless,

unsheltered world, a scene of wrath and unbridled ferocity, alone, deprived of that gentle and gracious guardianship to which members of God's elect flock are entitled. Like the hapless creature to which he compares himself, he is stripped of those defensive instincts which equip against danger, and is left naked to the chances of the prairie and the jungle. The godly man no longer possesses the arts by which the cunning and unscrupulous worldling may seem to protect himself for a time. He is a misfit in an evil society, and worse than a misfit. It was never intended that a man in whom, whatever his errors, there is a core of reverence and virtue should become habituated to vicious surroundings and make himself at home in spheres exposed to the judgments of wrath.

It is a hopeful augury for the future of the race that men everywhere have a poignant sense of dissatisfaction with the environment in which they find themselves, even when that environment has much to make it congenial from the worldly standpoint. The race has not yet come to its own, and is in conditions which do not altogether suit it. Men are sometimes restless and full of complainings because their sensuous thirsts are unslaked; but even when at length they attain more than heart could wish, the old discontent reappears. The ethical affections and affinities can find no satisfac-

tion in the prospect which opens out on every side. They are hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and for the time being are not satisfied. Men rarely if ever become reconciled to their lot till they are reconciled to God and His laws, for the unappeased God is present and making known His mind through all the incidents of that lot. The world into which they have wandered, and which immures them on every side, brings no sense of safety or of home. There is something missing which is profoundly essential. Primitive man was haunted in all his wanderings with the fear of ghosts. That fear is gone, but another fear still more distressing has come to take its place, the fear lest a man should have to meet again the accusing shadows of his own past misdoing. We have helped to make the world which terrifies the conscience, and it differs widely from that which God made and for which He made us.

The essence of all moral error, as set forth in the illustration of the lost sheep, is the displacement of Divine guidance by successive acts of self-will. The vagaries of appetite, the panic which scatters and implies defective trust in the power which protects, resentment against a state of daily subjection to the will of the Shepherd, may explain the hapless wanderings from a strong and peaceful fold. Men who are good in the main constituents

of the character may sometimes be led astray by the desires of this world. The romantic instinct for change may sometimes awake within the soul of a righteous man and allure him into balmy conditions bristling with perils. A defective faith in the cherishing providence which encircles his life may take him from a realm of fancied into real danger. A temper of unchastened pride sometimes arises within him and prompts him to resent the frustration of his own will and daily obedience to the will of one wiser than himself. It is through obedience to the inward voice or to the message conveyed by the accredited representatives of the Most High that men are kept in their right place, and have a sense of inviolable and all-comprehending protection. To indulge one's self-will can only end by putting the soul into a false and forlorn position.

A sense of his own moral obliquity and perverseness, then, entered into the distress and terror which overshadowed the mind of the Psalmist. He had no wish to disclaim responsibility for the position into which he had come. Men sometimes declare that the bad environment in which they wallow has been prepared by the acts of others, and the unbelieving fatalist is always ready to encourage such self-righteous sophisms. It is a fashion to speak of the vicious and criminal classes as if they

were entirely victims and had contributed nothing to their own undoing. The expression is often used—and possibly with sufficient truth in it to make it plausible—that there are those in our midst who are damned from their birth. But such language, whilst containing a core of truth, is perilously overcoloured and destroys the sense of individual responsibility. Leaving a small residuum of criminal lunatics out of the question, men and women, however meagre their chances, are to a greater extent than they admit self-victimised. They have wandered by their own thoughtless or wicked acts into the evils which enmesh them. At some point or other there has been a false step for which they ought to blame themselves, if they are capable of such heroic honesty. We should do the writer of this psalm a great injustice if we classed him with the flagrantly lawless, but he is quite ready to admit, and we must take him at his own reckoning, that he has wandered into the dire pit in which he finds himself. He has not been dropped down into this perilous position by the act of another. His separation from God and the light of His favour is due to his own misguided choice. "I have gone astray like a lost sheep." The note of confession is heard in his cry.

The Psalmist feels that, apart from Divine intervention, he cannot find himself and enter into

the path which will take him to his true goal. "Seek Thy servant." He has put himself on the wrong track, but is powerless to retrace his steps. He is lost in a terrifying maze, and will never find the way out alone. His exile, if the surmise be correct that he is in a land of strangers, seems to have isolated him even from the comfort and assurance of religion.

One can understand why this should be so. In the Psalmist's earlier judgment God and His gracious manifestations had been limited to the temple and its services, and now God must needs come forth from His shrine and seek the wanderer in his outward isolation and estrangement. Round about him were men rejoicing under the defence of the gods of the land, but his God was afar off. Unless Jehovah in gentleness and condescension take hold upon His servant, giving him a restored sense of guidance and salvation, as He took hold of the conscience-smitten pilgrim at Bethel, his career as a religious man and a servant of Jehovah will be at an end. The best part of his life may be lost. In these days of imperfect revelation it was a daring thing to ask that God would come to a solitary exile in a land profaned with idolatries and show the same care and tenderness that He had been wont to

exercise toward the elect nation as an undivided whole. The Psalmist's thought was a forecast of the redemptive mission of the Incarnate God who came to seek and save the lost. Depressing environments change, and black clouds are shot through with light when God seeks and finds the helpless wanderer. Redeeming mercy travels beyond the temple and beyond the sacred soil given to the children of the patriarchs, and responds to the cry of distress which is carried across the parched and desert spaces of the earth. "Seek Thy servant."

In our present-day life we may find a parallel to the conditions in which the Psalmist was stranded when he confessed his need of a seeking Shepherd. For many a man the shrines of his early life have vanished, and he finds himself in a wilderness without temple or sanctuary. He is amongst men who make little of the old conceptions of God, and who have nothing better to put in their place. He has to play his part on a stage furnished with the scenery of a new paganism. God has vanished for a time, or He is represented only by the afterglow. The voice Divine heard in the days of childhood is scarcely distinguishable from the soughing of the wind. The age needs a restored religion and is helpless to find it. Men can only

get back to God if God's presence asserts itself in seeking the forlorn and helpless soul.

It is said that some of the tribes of Australian blacks are so low down in the scale that they cannot even produce fire like their neighbours by rubbing dry sticks together. If the fire is lost, they must make long journeys to neighbouring tribes to recover it. And the man who through careless and disobedient acts has forfeited the light of life cannot recover it. Nor can he make the long pilgrimage and appear before God, for he is paralysed. The dark mountains on which he stumbles are very dark indeed, and God must needs seek His servants and restore the lost gift. "If the light that is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness." "Seek Thy servant."

The Psalmist pleads for the saving intervention of the Most High on the ground that the Divine commandments have not lost their hold upon his consciousness. They come into constant remembrance, and he cannot make himself at home in conditions which may seem to befit foolish and forgetful souls. It is impossible for him to throw away those high standards of conduct which have approved themselves to his judgment in the past. And in this the Psalmist bears witness to a universal fact.

Appearances notwithstanding, the great mass of our fellow-men are incapable of reconciling themselves to an impious and corrupt environment. In many of its qualities man's moral life differs profoundly from his physical constitution. Nature will fit a man by slow degrees to almost any conditions in which he may choose to live. In a few generations the subtropical sunlight will change the blonde into the brunette, and it is said that in many of the American States the people of blue eyes and flaxen hair have all but disappeared. It is a question of physical adaptation, and the process is so rapid that anthropologists now find no difficulty in believing that black and white races came from a common stock. The physical life will bend itself to almost any extreme of climate. But no such elasticity can be found in man's moral nature. For perhaps ten thousand years he has been trying to fit himself to an impious and corrupt environment, and he is as far off the goal as ever. The broad outlines of the Divine commandment are so stamped upon him that it is quite impossible he should finally forget them. He has no power of finally and completely adapting himself to evil. A scoffing playwright and social reformer has said in a paradox which verges on licentiousness that

"Duty is what one should never do." The advice has been acted upon by vast multitudes for thousands of years, and yet man is not rid of the sense of duty, for it is ineradicable. The sheep needs a shepherd. And the sense of moral incongruity which haunts men everywhere arises from the need of God, and this need of God is in its deepest roots identified with the need of righteousness. Men working in circumstances of outward danger forget the perils, but few men can reconcile themselves to the moral hazards in which they live, with all that those hazards imply. There is such a thing as reversion to a noble as well as decadence to a base type, and the Psalmist is always coming back to his early training and the higher nature which was rooted within him. If we have gone astray, let us be thankful that we cannot quite reconcile ourselves to the surroundings into which we have drifted, and that the remembrance of indissoluble obligations comes back to us. Perhaps the unhappiest of all men are those who have turned their backs upon God, and who, do what they will, cannot fit themselves into the worldly parts they want to act. They are never quite at their ease in the company of the vicious and of the profane. They cannot forget God's commandments, and in spite of

themselves the recollection that they are created with faculties for worship and obedience returns to them at more or less frequent intervals. There are more men and women around us than we think, who seem abandoned to evil courses and yet who do not quite forget God's commandments. They do their best to forget, but without success. They do not allow themselves time to think, or there would be a more constant remembrance of that law for conformity to which they were created. One of the aims of modern life seems to be to shut out all opportunities for reflection, and the frenzies of business and pleasure alike are conceived with this motive. And yet the experiment is a failure, for few men become finally and completely at home in sin. They are stranded between conflicting interests, astray from God and yet visited by many a remembrance of the Divine law, and their state calls for compassion. That they do not forget constitutes an appeal to the pity of both God and their fellow-men.

These words are the argument of hope. If the Psalmist has been brought into evil and repulsive conditions of life he has not been mastered by them, for traces of his kinship with the Divine still linger within his soul. His remembrance of God's commandment implies that there is some-

thing within him which admits of being saved, and that God cannot fail to respond to these signs of spiritual life, and is seeking His exiled servant and will yet bring him home. This is no vain assertion of personal worth, but simply a token within the soul of the Psalmist that he is not numbered with the reprobate. The theologians remind us from time to time of the total depravity of human nature, but that grave doctrine is not intended to imply that Divine grace cannot create within us a good which may contend with evil from the very beginning. To speak of total depravity without recognising that its worst issues are counteracted by a principle of moral recuperation is to plunge men into despair. We may so disparage human nature as to ignore the holy antidotes which assert themselves within it. For no single moment is evil left alone in the mind. The remembrance of God's law to which the Psalmist felt himself impelled was a sign that a Divine breath was reviving his life, and that the unseen God was set upon his complete recovery. There was no room for despair. Desponding souls who are crying out of the depths need to remember that their unhappy condition is due to their moral sensitiveness, and that whilst there is this sign of religious susceptibility, recovery to righteousness is more than possible. The Psalmist

could not think himself cut off, dead, irrecoverable, a worthless wreck in the sight of God, whilst these moral functions were maintained within him. In his willing remembrance of God's commandments he shows his readiness to co-operate with the work through which he is to be redeemed. He who is visited with such holy memories is in no sense reprobate. The trouble which vexes the soul arises from its responsiveness under disheartening conditions to moral and spiritual obligation, and whilst these benign reactions occur within the nature death is yet a long way off and the seeking Shepherd is close at hand. "Seek Thy servant; for I do not forget Thy commandments."

V

THE MENTOR OF IMPERFECTION

"Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye are otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you: only, whereunto we have already attained, by that same rule let us walk."—PHIL. iii. 15, 16 (R.V.).

IN this chapter the apostle disclaims the attainment of perfection and yet within the space of a few sentences affirms perfection both of himself and of his fellow-believers. "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect." "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded." It is obvious that in the two cases he cannot be speaking of the same kind of perfection. Perfection in one sense may be affirmed in view of the different standards of excellence characteristic of the different stages of development through which the religious life passes in its progress towards the final goal. Within the limits imposed upon it by its environment an embryonic character may be as complete as the character enlarged and matured by great

opportunities. The apostle and his comrades in the faith were already taking the first successful steps towards an illimitable ideal; clearly defined landmarks of progress had been reached; and in these great, specific beginnings there was the earnest of a glorious and unblemished future. No longer the babes of ritual, they were filled with the overflowing life of the gospel. And yet folded up in the deep counsels of Christ there were further ideals in comparison with which they were far from perfect. Each separate day has its own appointed standards of perfection, and the day of the believer's resurrection from the dead has its own distinctive and matchless standard.

In the early verses of this chapter the apostle sketches a high state of present attainment made possible by the grace of the gospel. Those in whom the new dispensation fulfils its great ends are no longer the babes of an effete ritual, but "worship by the Spirit of God." Their service is no longer that of the sterile letter, but is mediated by a Divine, indwelling, soul-sanctifying presence of life and power. It is a service of inspiration, and as such transcends the punctilious and well-meaning obedience of the past. A Divine breath impels and energises the soul in its approach toward God. Right desires are called forth and approved, the resources from which they

are satisfied opened to view, and messages of benediction brought back from God by this ever-active and sacred Mediator within the soul. Common acts acquire the sanctity which belongs to the most exalted worship, and the fragrance of consecration invests all the movements of the life.

The apostle defines the condition of mind in which this exalted experience takes its rise. "And glory in Christ Jesus." It was here that he and those who were in fellowship with him had found this new secret of power. The sin which inhibited deep converse with God and harmony with all His activities had been taken away by the wonderful work of the Redeemer. New and more vital forces had come into worship, and higher virtue had been made to permeate its acts. And this attitude of mind arose from a discovery of the narrow value of external religion and a repudiation of its consummating power. "And have no confidence in the flesh." He who rises into the high estate of the new election and stands in Christ Jesus has been made to confess the helplessness of unaided human nature and to distrust those outward ordinances which an unspiritual man prides himself in observing. All confidence in the flesh and its normal possibilities has broken down, and made way for a truer appreciation of evangelical privilege and of the faith which is its groundwork. There

is a perfection which consists in a right attitude of soul towards God, and those who had travelled thus far with the apostles had surpassed their fathers and had attained it. It was to produce such perfection that, in the view of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the New Covenant was established; for he tells us the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of the better hope did. The worshipper was made perfect as touching the conscience, and thus the first stage of evangelical development was reached.

But this elemental perfection is always conjoined with aspirations after boundless advancement. The highest uplifting of character through the virtue of Christ's work and living personality is but a beginning. New standards rise before the mind. Fellowship with the Lord ingerminates fresh and immeasurable hopes. It is a sign of a limited and earth-bound perfection that it is always dreaming of that which is beyond. The perfect health of the child is an earnest of many other kinds of perfection that may arise in its growth and after-unfolding. From the perfect child you may by and by get the perfect athlete, the perfect musician, the perfect explorer, the perfect scientist, the perfect statesman and reformer. An unblemished and overflowing vitality is the basis of the many-sided types of excellence attained in the maturer

life. If there is no curiosity, no straining after adventure, no ambition, no peering outlook into the future, no pursuit of visions, such a stagnation of the instincts implies defective organs, malnutrition, poisoned surroundings. The initiatory perfection of the evangelical state implies some kind of outlook into the spiritual potentialities of the coming years.

The apostle illustrates this by a vivid picture of his personal experience. The temper of sacrifice had been kindled within him, and his old estimates of loss and gain had been inverted. He counted all things loss to gain Christ and be found in Him. Through union with Christ he was hoping to sound the deeper secrets of His redeeming passion and to enter into the victory of His resurrection life. He was pressing towards the achievement of a character which should be consonant with the highest glory of the resurrection. The resurrection would come to some men by an inward development which fitted them to enter into its powers and opportunities, whilst it would come to others as an unwelcome cataclysm from without. The apostle was panting after the perfection which would give him a place in the first resurrection. He had not yet attained to all those purposes cherished in the mind of the Master who met him on the way to Damascus. He did not imagine that some morning he would wake up and find

himself in possession of this paramount excellence, but he kept his powers in tense and constant exercise. His new spiritual instincts were impelling him into mysterious paths of progress. In view of past standards he was perhaps perfect, but not in view of the new standards which were rising before him. In the riots at Ephesus, in the freezing atmospheres of supercilious Athens, amidst the sordid commercialisms of Corinth, in the ups and downs of his imprisonment at Rome, his attitude was that of the unflagging racer, and towards the prize in the distant horizon he was always bending. The Master's voice was calling him upwards, and he wished those who already possessed a common experience to feel the same impelling instinct towards progress.

Moreover, if they were content to live on inferior levels, if the ideal set forth in Jesus Christ grew dim, if the steps showed signs of faltering, if the interpretation of the gospel tended to become self-centred, God would rebuke the shortcoming by direct revelation. A mystic mentor against imperfection would be found within to safeguard them against the illusions of egoism content in all things. Every arrest in a sincere believer's march towards the highest spiritual excellence is announced by a direct revelation from God. The religion of Jesus Christ is pre-eminently illuminat-

ing, and sets forth in clear light not only the being and character of God, but the successive stages through which man passes in the course of his spiritual history. All darkness is abnormal for those who have been brought into the kingdom. There is nothing hid that shall not be made known. The cry from the housetop takes the place of the whisper in the ear or the muttered oracle of the secret chamber or cave. Jesus Christ was no patron of the obscurantist. And the converted man is the subject of continuous revelations, because the functions of his spiritual senses have been restored. The atmosphere may be quivering with wireless messages of profound significance, but the Polynesian native paddling round his coral reefs is no wiser, for he lacks the receiving instruments and the interpreting code. The man who has received a new life and has come into fellowship with God is not groping his way through uncertain twilight towards an ill-defined goal of perfection without help or directing counsels. This fact is complementary to the great doctrine of assurance. When the sin of the contrite heart has been washed away, the Spirit presses His convincing work into subtler spheres of temper and action. If a man is less perfect than he ought to be, he is not dependent for knowledge of the fact upon the criticisms of candid neighbours, or even

upon a prolonged and careful study of his own character. It is certified to his consciousness. We cannot be surprised into final shame and frustration through inadequate self-knowledge. An express train has sometimes come to the brink of a river or a chasm, and the driver finds the bridge is gone. And disaster, alas! stares him in the face, for the wires through which he should have been apprised of danger have been blown down and the signalling stations have been wrecked in a sudden storm. We need not fear the last judgment will be pregnant with arbitrary and unforeseen disasters if we keep in union with God, for we have timely warning of our imperfections. When we are willing to give heed, we shall find ourselves guarded against self-deception, for wherein we fall short of His standards God always signals it to the consciousness.

Some imperfections are so spiritual in the forms of their manifestation that they must necessarily be reserved for God's inward judgments. The patriarch Job, with a strange anticipation of the larger knowledge of the later centuries, speaks of God as visiting man every morning and trying him every moment. By a scale of finer accuracy than we can either devise or apply He measures our shortcomings. Patent errors of temper or conduct often appear within us which our neigh-

bours may justly rebuke. We are bound into the corporate fellowship of Christ's Church not only that we may receive instruction and encouragement, but admonition likewise. But there are attitudes of thought and inner dispositions which no adept in the arts of spiritual direction can possibly deal with. They belong to the province of the great Soul-Searcher—He never forgets His work. He visits us morning by morning and evening by evening, and indicates His verdict upon the stage we have reached in our upward struggle and our posture of soul towards the spiritual possibilities which are before us. In ways we cannot explain we learn our exact place in the spiritual scale, and know without doubt whether our tone of spirit satisfies His standard. Much in us can only be judged by the discerning eye of God. We must find out at His feet whether we are facing the shining goals to which He calls us. Our spiritual dispositions often elude the judgments of our wisest and most faithful neighbours, but not the judgments of a God who will not keep silence. He seeks our perfecting with a zeal which never flags, and is strict in defending us against all the habits of feeling which may defeat our best possibilities. God wants not only to save from appalling jeopardy, but to raise us into the highest possibilities of a redeemed estate, and

we shall not be suffered to miss our way in the darkness.

This unresting disclosure of slackness and imperfection is a sign of the strong, patient aspirations of a Divine Father for His children. "As many as I love I reprove," and the reproof is as unwearying as the love. Men tire of speaking to each other of their errors and infirmities, because the task is uncongenial and the love they feel is superficial and intermittent. They look upon persistent faults as ineradicable long before such a depressing conclusion is necessary. It is assumed that blemishes of character are akin to chronic physical infirmities and must needs run on to the end of life itself. The instructor of a child will abandon as hopeless the task of correcting a lisp, a mispronunciation, an ungainly nervous habit long before the child's own parents will slacken in effort. The master of a studio soon finds the range of his pupils' talents, and will continue to criticise some in whom he has an interest or who show finer promise for a longer term than others. Of one set he says, "Such workers must be content with mediocre performances. If they can earn a respectable living by brush or chisel, that must suffice. They will never produce masterpieces, and it is useless carping at their limitations." But if his own son happens to be amongst his pupils he does not see the limitations,

but will continue his methods of pointing out blemishes and drawbacks through a much longer term of apprenticeship, privately at least. And unless he is phenomenally cold-blooded in his impartiality, he will believe greater things concerning the future prospects of his son than concerning the rest. The optimistic outlook compels patient criticism and admonition. God's hopes for us are as indomitably passionate as those of a parent, and that is why He never wearies of reminding us when we fall short of our best. The pains and shames called forth by His rebuke are the birth-pangs of spiritual perfection. When our ideals grow dim, when our steps falter, when the standard of aspiration is lowered (even though we may not have slipped back into iniquities which imperil the soul), we shall be made to know it. If we are content with mediocrity, rudimentary experience, second-grade pieties; if glowing aims and dreams of high beatitude fade from the consciousness—God will vouchsafe admonitory revelations. The cords of love which draw us out of the pit draw us Godward, heavenward.

The inward message which reminds the soul of its slackness in the pursuit of perfection is a sign of the Divine resourcefulness. A right-minded man ceases to talk of a disease or disaster for which he has no remedy to offer. It aggravates the

distress of the victim. His silence is a sign that he has come to the end of his expedients. He is baffled. The master must be ill-natured indeed, if he is garrulous about the shortcomings of a pupil out of whom he scarcely hopes to get further improvement. Little practical gain would come from pushing the study of pathology into new regions unless the study of therapeutics can be made to keep pace with it, or at least can be made to follow hard after. It is barbaric to uncover incurable sores and to expatiate upon the pain and unsightliness they indicate. The doctor surely does not want his patient to go into the grave through the doors of the madhouse! A humane and sagacious science is dumb and makes no sign when it is at the end of its resources. When God brings home to men the full measure of their imperfections, it is because He has remedies in reserve. His secret rebuke is not intended to cast into despair, but to bring us to the threshold of new worlds of grace. God is too kind to remind us of imperfections from which no deliverance is to be found. Does it seem beyond our strength that we should be able to count all things but loss so that we may gain Christ? God is able to teach us a new science of values and new rules of arithmetic. It is not beyond His power to make us realise that self-

renunciation is the highest privilege of the present life. Does it seem as though we should be putting an unnatural strain upon the faculties to be ever looking towards an unseen prize? God can make the habit rich in invigoration to all the powers of the nature. Is this soul-posture, symbolised by the bent and straining figure of the race, impossible in a world which claims so much of our thought? The things impossible with men are possible with God. Is it an extravagant dream that we should be so conformed to the death of Jesus and so united to the mystery of His cross that we shall say, "Master, let me bear for others some of the burdens Thou didst bear for me"? We may be made to realise that we are His members. Is it the dream of fanaticism that we should know the power of His resurrection and feel in our mortal bodies the thrills of His exalted life? We are not dealing with an insolvent God, a Saviour at bay, a checkmated King; and whatever imperfection He makes known to us is amenable to His redemptive methods. If He shows us a staring gap in our lives, it is that we may learn how it can be filled from His fulness.

The apostle reminds us that the advancements of the future must be determined by the methods of the past, if the past has in it a beginning of salvation. "Whereunto we have already attained,

by that same rule let us walk." All progress is through fidelity to a method that has been tested and verified. Spiritual life contains within itself the law of its own coming developments. If we have had a sense of salvation, the larger and the richer future will be determined by the principles of the past. We have already in our keeping the master key to every coming problem of character. The merchant who thinks in millions has to apply the same rules of arithmetic as when he began Profit and Loss in his schooldays. The inventor is applying old laws under new conditions. The man who is going to a tropical country consults a specialist, and after he has paid his guineas finds he has to follow much the same methods for keeping his health as he followed at home. We know the pathway by which the gift of sanctity is reached if we know the pathway by which we attain a sense of the Divine forgiveness.

There is a tendency for men to hanker after the new and the romantic in religion. A sense of inward dissatisfaction drives one man to Rome, another to Plymouthism, a third to Christian Science, a fourth to Spiritualism. In nine cases out of ten the inward dissatisfaction remains, for the problem of personal perfection has been shirked. The soul has been sent on a false quest.

THE MENTOR OF IMPERFECTION

"Follow the telegraph wires, and you cannot go wrong," is often the answer given to the traveller when he inquires his way in a foreign land. It is a well-defined way that leads to the holiness we seek. We must shape our course by the analogy of the past if at least we have entered into the experience of salvation. This discovery of imperfection which comes to us corresponds to that conviction of sin out of which the faith which brought us back to God arose, and it fulfils the same end in a riper stage of the religious history. The faith which realises Christ as our righteousness is one and the same in its essential qualities with that which realises Christ as our sanctification. A thread of continuity runs through the manifold phases of our spiritual development, and all degrees of fellowship with Jesus Christ are bound together by one uniting principle.

VI

THE RESENTMENT OF SIMPLICITY

"Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and recover the leper."—2 KINGS v. 11 (R.V.).

TO find a leper's unsightly skin hiding a heart of untamed pride surprises us. But it is a part of that profound mystery of evil, bits of which are ever unfolding themselves to us as our knowledge of human nature widens. One might have thought that this commander-in-chief of the Syrian forces would have been humbled to the dust by the dire calamity which was preying upon his life; that his brilliant conquests would have passed out of mind, and that he would have loathed the decorations and costly raiment which seemed to mock the miserable flesh they adorned. But the stab that Fate had given, after smiling upon him in so many other things, only seemed to make him more vain, irritable, and overbearing. Men are reluctant to dwell on what is uncongenial and loathsome in their personal lot, especially

when they are surrounded by groups of obsequious retainers. This great general liked to think of his victories, of the skilful strategy and courage he had shown on the battlefield, of the high price put upon his service by the king, of his gorgeous robes; and the face to which his attendants could scarcely lift their gaze without disgust, his half-insensate limbs, his swollen, tainted flesh, were kept out of mind as though they were an evil dream.

It was in no very promising temper that this brilliant soldier came to a land which had often been under the heel of his royal master. The official document he brought in his hand seemed to make Jehovah one of the minor hierarchies of the spiritual universe. He was accredited by a sealed and formal letter from the King of Syria to the King of Samaria, and he doubtless expected the missive to work wonders. At the first glance it might look like a bit of courtly etiquette for the head of one state to approach the prophet of a neighbouring state through the established diplomatic channels; but there is a deep religious offence in it that does not appear at first. He was going to get at Elisha by dictating to his overlord, or at least that construction might be placed upon the method. From the beginning Oriental potentates have been flattered into the idea that their

sceptre is swayed in some sense over the very gods; for all the gods reign by State decrees, and the mortal on the throne often puts down one and sets up another. The king is the supreme pontiff of the nation and authorises every cult of the land, and under his sign-manual priests and prophets, soothsayers and magicians, alike act. There was an imperious accent in this document which almost put it into the category of an order in council. A healing miracle of unexampled potency was asked, as though it were a common bit of tribute due from a subject territory. To heal a leper was one of the arts of high magic, and it was assumed that the prophet was a mere creature or puppet of the court, and that his oracles could be bought and sold. Perhaps there was a little excuse for that. His own national traditions favoured the idea, and even in Israel itself within recent years bands of prophets had held themselves subject to the court and bound to respond to its wishes. With a royal letter one can surely do great things; and Naaman thought that possessed of such credentials, he was sure to succeed, and to succeed according to his own ideas.

And this military hero meant to pay for everything he was hoping to get. He could not brook the idea of being beholden to the tribal god of a vanquished race, for this would have been little

less than asking mercy at the hands of his own prisoners of war. It was into the land of his ancient enemies he was venturing, and he would not come as a weak suppliant for compassion. Upon his sumpter mules he brought talents of silver and shekels of gold, together with a stock of embroidered vestments enough to clothe a mean subject-court with magnificence. He wanted the prophet to be assured at the very beginning what a rich and open-handed patron he would prove himself if the experiment succeeded. Like the King of Moab, who, when he hired the covetous Baalam, would not haggle about terms, and was ready to tender any price desired, he would count out his treasures royally for every service which might prove of benefit. He was not going to remain debtor either to Jehovah or Jehovah's people; for this might be embarrassing in the coming years. He must have his hands free; for there was no telling what new political complications might arise. How paltry his conception of God, and how supercilious to make the representative of a Divine religion a well-satisfied client! Now God did not intend that he should go back to his home after receiving the priceless gift of a sane and a wholesome body feeling that he had paid a just and equitable bill and perhaps given a little over. Had the captain

lavished his uttermost and beggared his fortune, it would have been a poor, niggardly remuneration for curing leprosy, a task, humanly speaking, unexampled and impossible. God never does help by extraordinary interpositions a man who is not willing to remain His debtor to the very end of life. That is vital to the doctrine of grace. Gehazi, it is true, frustrated the Divine purpose in part, for he allowed Naaman to continue his journey feeling that he had at least paid a respectable instalment of the debt; and perhaps this circumstance explains the fact that war soon broke out again between Syria and Israel. Had there been a due and unqualified sense of gratitude on the part of Naaman and his royal master, surely hostilities could not have lightly broken out again, and some scheme of arbitration would have been devised. The captain would have said, "I can never again lead an army against the land where I was miraculously healed."

The man who comes to God, or to one who is the steward of God's gifts, thinking he is going to pay an equivalent for the help and salvation he gets, had better recast his notions as speedily as may be, for it is impossible he should receive on any such terms. They are an insult to the infinite love. Never be tempted to tender a price for the boon you seek before God and dangle the offer as

a bait in His presence. He will not treat with you upon the basis of a commercial transaction in which two parties are assumed to benefit by the exchange. He does not put His gifts upon the market, gifts which are more precious than life itself. Their values are such that your arithmetic cannot grapple with them. If you are going to receive at God's hands, you must dismiss the idea of prescriptive right; you must not come into His presence as though you were heading a triumphal procession; and if you are even a master of many nations, you must bring no price in your hands.

By a discernment instinctive to a mind in constant fellowship with God, the prophet knew it was God's purpose to save Naaman by the word of an invisible messenger, and refused to assume a position which might obscure that all-important fact. It was most important that this should be so, and Elisha must needs keep himself in the background. The Syrian religion, in which the unhappy soldier had been bred, was to a great extent dependent upon the senses, and such a religion leaves little room for spiritual views of God and for the exercise of that faith according to which God adjusts the bestowment of His gifts. Naaman wanted to see a process, and even in the end he was not entirely cured of his superstitions, for he asked a load of sacred earth on which he

might rear an altar to God's honour. He was seeking signs and outward portents. He looked for a prophet who would come forth and work himself into religious frenzies suited to the dervish, and then call loudly upon God in high-sounding words, and make deft passes over the uncomely form of his patient. He sought for something at which he could stare, outward gestures that would sustain his confidence and assure him a phenomenal act was being really done. He was prejudiced against the Divine method of simplicity. But he must be healed, if healed at all, by the direct act of the Unseen. Where there is neither priest, prophet, nor altar in sight, the bejewelled leper must be cleansed from his foulness. The miracle must be wrought by giving credence to one whose form he had not seen and obeying that message to the letter. Much good from the religious standpoint would it have done Naaman in his after-life if the prophet had been the chief performer in his salvation, for he was returning to a land where there was neither shrine, prophet, nor outward symbol of Jehovah's presence. It is God's act to do this great thing, and God alone must have the glory of it. The prophet must keep himself out of sight. God works most wondrously when the prophet keeps himself in the background; and in the recognition of this

all-important fact Elisha was centuries before his time, wiser than the best traditions of the past.

For the last fifty years a strong tendency has shown itself in the religious life of our own country to extol and magnify the official power of the Church and to elaborate and multiply its ritual. It is a part of the growing passion for pageants and a symptom of an attenuated aptitude for the spiritual. But it is possible for the Church to be magnified whilst the unseen Lord and Saviour is abased. Naamans still flourish in our midst who lay stress upon the visible headship of the Church and assume the Lord's delegates ought to be in evidence upon every possible occasion. There is no regeneration unless the servant of God puts on his court robes and spreads out his plumage and signs the sign of the cross, whilst acolytes wait upon his steps. There is no true eucharist without vestments. The priest must be a chief figure in the Church and must play the chief part at every function. We want an ostentatious salvation. We cry out for elaboration in worship—holy shows, impressive spectacles, captivating appeals to the eye and the ear; colour, movement, incense, postures, processions, manual acts in the sacraments. But God often chooses to be alone with human souls in the great crises of destiny; and if the Naamans of to-day are to be healed, the

conversion must take place far away from the sanctuary of the ecclesiastic, with no altar in sight and whilst the simple behest of the Most High is obeyed. God's servants must needs hide themselves from view, or they will not be privileged to see His wonder-working power. Redemptive signs and wonders will be few and far between. Many a rich leper will consume his days in sighing where the ideas of Naaman are the basis of Church order and ceremony. You must be saved by obeying a message from the lips of holy men behind the veil, men you have never seen—saved possibly in the surroundings that seem least impressive and that mortify every lingering bit of pride within you. A task is laid upon you in unfaltering terms: "Go wash," and do it seven times if need be, for you must have the patience of faith, and in your reiterated acts the foundations of new habits must be laid. Faith is not a brief impulse that may be speedily reversed and forgotten. Lave your soul in the mystic influences that flow from the Cross. Do it again and again and again. Another cannot take your place or help out the supreme act of faith. The prophet is not going to wave his magic hand whilst you are passive. You must act for yourself. Try if God will not put honour upon a message from lips you have never seen. When God saves us He

takes us forthwith out of the realm of the senses and brings us into new spheres of life and conscious experience.

This hero of many battles made his pilgrimage to Samaria with a mind full of the most detailed preconceptions. Perhaps it was due in part to an idolatrous training. When a man has worshipped graven images which having eyes see not, hands and handle not, feet and walk not, it is necessary that programmes should be arranged on their behalf. Their fête-days must be fixed, their viands chosen, their processions appointed, and their actions predetermined. A devotee in heathen temples naturally falls into the habit of forestalling the wishes of his immobile deity. And Naaman seems to have brought the habit with him and arranged things in detail for God and His prophet. The order and form of the miracle is settled beforehand. Perhaps his ready-made opinions are due in part to temperament also, and to his experience in the campaigns he had led. We can see at once that he has the imagination out of which successful military commanders are made, for he has the whole thing perfectly mapped out before his eye. He has planned the situation as he would have planned a battle, but for once his calculations are at fault. Nothing turned out just as he had expected, for he was dealing with events in which he

could not force or control the issue. This famous chieftain had been accustomed to gather up clues and arrange tiny details beforehand, and everything was elaborated within his own fancy, even to the words of thanksgiving he would speak at the fitting moment. But when God works He does not work according to our schemes and programmes.

We want to see more of the means employed to effect our salvation from guilt and condemnation. Our self-respect must be adequately cared for. We must not let our position suffer before men even when we are in the act of receiving from the King of kings. Multitudes of souls are kept out of grace by rigid, self-opinionated preconceptions, the combined result perhaps of both training and temperament. We fix beforehand the place, time, and method of our own conversion, and specify the precise form it must assume just as if we were ordering a suit of clothes. In fact, more often than not these preconceptions are symptoms of a proud, wilful, overbearing temper of soul. Whenever we expect blessings at God's hand let us always come before Him with humble and open minds, free from those hard-and-fast ideas which may possibly put us athwart His purposes. If we realise the tragedy of our need we shall not care how God works for our deliverance, so that He

does work. It is an inveterate habit with some of us to plan. We plan everything that takes place in the household, fix trains for our friends, programmes for our allies, and policies for the Government. After the experience we have had of the world it is only fitting that we should be able to arrange the details of every conceivable situation. In some things, perhaps, we have better notions of the way to go to work than our friends and neighbours. Remember your Divine benefactor does not need your plans. He has His own methods of work, infinitely varied to suit individual needs, and you must not draw near to Him with a mind packed with cast-iron preconceptions, or you may prove your own worst enemy.

The prophet was careful not to feed the pride and obstinacy of the man who had come with so much ostentation to his door, but kept himself in the retirement of his inner chamber. To give in to the notions proclaimed in the tinkling and prancing of the procession, and show the slightest approval of such blatant methods, would have been to hinder the healing of this ill-fated soldier. Naaman scarcely thought the prophet was decently polite, inasmuch as he did not rush out to wait upon such a distinguished visitor. Elisha at least was no courtier, and the man who is cannot be a true mouthpiece and servant of God. The

Christian ministry has no room for the man of soft, cooing words and purring obsequiousness.

We are to please all men for their good to edification; but it is feared some representatives of the Church try to popularise its interests by flattery. They go with the times, speaking even of publicans, music-hall artistes, actors, and buffoons in general as though they were the chief benefactors of their age. If they make a speech in the slums the working men are flattered, if in the suburbs they find that the strength of morality is in the English middle classes. If they are in agricultural villages they fawn upon the squire and his friends. But the religion of the true prophet, whilst it is gracious and pitiful to all classes, is complaisant to no man. There are those who assume religion should be as squeezable as a parliamentary candidate of uncertain prospects at election times. It must adapt itself, and such a term may mean much or little. It must surround men with profuse and genial attentions, and be glib with cozening words to the princes of this world. Now the man who stands hat in hand to Naaman when Naaman draws up before the door, and flatters his pride, obviously hinders the process of his salvation. There are unsavoury lepers needing help and deliverance who want to come into the kingdom as grandiose patrons. Men are sometimes spoken of as the

benefactors of the Church, but the only benefactor the Church ought to know is the Lord who died for it. Men in purple and fine linen, in urgent need of rescue from imminent perdition, sometimes think that all their whims must be consulted. If they have artistic tastes, religious services must be elaborated to meet their exact requirements. If they are of a metaphysical turn, Christianity must present itself as a philosophy and respond in every way to their personal caprice. If they are scientific, Christianity must argue with them on their own lines and justify its first chapter of Genesis. If they are political, the pulpit must meet them half-way and press home one or two items of the party programme. Their faintest inclinations must be studied and reckoned with. If they are to be won at all, it must be by the arts of compromise and conciliation. When the Church has a proud Naaman to reckon with it is perhaps as well to leave the foaming potentate for a few moments tills his rage dies down, and he discovers how near he is of missing salvation by demanding that flatteries should be showered upon him in the crisis of his destiny. It is a part of Naaman's salvation that he should be dealt with by the prophet's somewhat brusque code of etiquette.

"He turned away in a rage." Not only were his schemes upset and his dignity ignored, but his

sense of patriotism was deeply wounded. If it was a case of lustrations only, why, the rivers which found their way through the plains of Damascus, watering its peach and apple orchards, refreshing its roses, and murmuring sweet, soothing music in his own palace grounds, were better than all the waters of Jordan. However much disrespect to his rank he might pass by, he could not brook this slight upon his fatherland.

God may see fit to save you by the method which most affronts your pride; indeed, it is certain He will if you are to know what inward salvation means. You must take the gift of redemption from One who belongs to a despised and oft-conquered race, from One whom the Jew cast out and crucified. The gospel message which brings escape from spiritual disease will make you angry. You have said again and again that you will not listen to such a doctrine as that of human depravity, atonement by the Cross and Passion of Jesus, a Divine wrath against sin, the desolating and immitigable doom brought at last upon all impenitent souls. If such revolting archaisms are taught, you will give up your pew, withdraw your subscriptions, absent yourself from public worship. The Christianity which has power to save men will always make some of us as angry as Naaman when he turned from the door of Elisha, and the

Christianity which does not now and again act in this particular way is not that of Jesus the Saviour. "He turned and went away in a rage." Well, it is either the affront to your preconceptions and the death-blow to your pride, or the leprosy that will cleave to the soul for ever and cannot be healed. You must make your choice. Prejudice and this abiding blight on the spiritual life are inseparable, and must go hand in hand through the ages. They will stay as your companions, or take their departure in company.

God's methods are always simple, and the simpler the method the greater the achievement. Recoil from the simplicity of God's methods contributes not a little to the sum of the world's unbelief. Those methods are simple beyond our dreams. Our pride is a part of the deep disease that needs to be grappled with, and God cannot deliver us by a complex method that flatters our appetite for distinction and vainglory. We always want to make salvation deep, obscure, abstruse. But God always wants to make it plain. The pathway of eternal life is the pathway in which we go like common wayfarers, and believe when no sign from spiritual worlds gleams about our pathway, and the prophet himself who has given us God's message is far away in the background. Where His word is trusted, God never fails to work.

VII

THE DIVINE ENDUEMENT OF HOPE

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost."—ROM. xv. 13.

THIS benediction is pitched in a common keynote with the apostle's character—hope. The invocation opens with this strain: "The God of hope," for the origin of this virtue is Divine; and it closes in the same high accent: "That ye may abound in hope." And is it not precisely the same note which begins, rules, and consummates the apostle's long life of strength and unselfishness? If the question is asked, What one thing more than another enlists our admiration and amazement as we follow in the footsteps of Paul? Wherein lies the secret of his resolute perseverance, his prodigious force, his undaunted activity and enterprise? the answer is obvious—his consistent and unwavering hopefulness. And whence did he draw his inspiration? It was a pentecostal enduement. We learn the secret in the terms of his own prayer.

What nobler benediction could the apostle ask for his friends than to pray that his own experience might be repeated in others; that the gift of hope, which was another form of the baptism of power, might be richly bestowed upon them; that the same spirit of hopefulness might take possession of these Roman believers amidst the deep discouragements and the unexampled opportunities of the Imperial capital; and that through faith they might be filled with the joy and peace out of which his own glorious and indomitable anticipations took their rise?

This benediction seems to put certain graces into a specific relation to each other. Abounding hope takes its rise in the peace and joy of faith, and peace and joy come down into the soul direct from God on high. We are reminded of the channels which connect together a great chain of lakes. In Equatorial Africa one great lake is fed from mountains by waters that never fail, and through obscure channels another lake receives its bounteous stores of water, and out of this flows the Nile, and the rich green valleys of Egypt are created by its gifts. The fulness of the believer's joy is fed from beyond the hills, and joy replenishes hope, and from this abounding virtue the believer's own soul is enriched, and he becomes a benefactor of the world.

Hope is the nerve and sinew of holy toil. These words occur in close relation to, and perhaps as the complement of, a practical exhortation. The apostle has just been urging the Jewish and Gentile sections of the Church at Rome to receive each other as Christ had received them to the glory of God the Father. God had promised impartial blessing through Christ Jesus to all alike, and in accordance with the ancient prophecies the Gentiles were already hoping in Him. And then follows the benediction, suggesting by its juxtaposition with these practical counsels the thought that unless they had this abounding hope for themselves and others they would be unfit to carry out the inspired behests of the apostle. Lacking this gracious temper they would be repelled by each other's narrowness, Gentile recoiling from the harsh bigotry of the Jew, and Jew alienated by the laxity of the Gentile; and the Gentiles' hope would have been conceived in vain. And so it is clear that hope stood vitally related to their practical usefulness as a Church, and to their fitness to fulfil towards each other the merciful purposes of the great God of hope. In the absence of hope there could be no tender forbearance, no mutual edification, no diligent and effectual labour.

Hope rooted in an experience of joy and peace

widens out into hope for the race, and so accelerates the many forms of unselfish toil. These inward gifts are the signs of a change that has removed disease and restored the functions of the spiritual life, and the power producing this change can deal with all the evils that work around us as well as within our own personality. Indeed, it is by the enlargement of this experience into hope, and the service of our generation, that it is saved from self-centred egoism. Since this gracious change arises from the inworking Spirit promised to all, and not from the virtues of our own temperament and character, there is no reason why it should not come to every man under the sun. Our joy and peace compel us to hope for others, for they are not perquisites and monopolies, and generate goodwill to mankind. If we have escaped condemnation, the same possibility is open to them on the same grounds. It is selfish to desire this peace for our own gratification and release from fear, unless it is the earnest of coming good for those to whom our hearts go out. It is mere covetousness to want this joy, unless coarse and gloomy natures are to be brought into the light that gladdens us, and degraded homes are to be refined and filled with the same pure blessedness. Such is the cry of every true heart touched from on high; and in this plenteous bestowment of peace

and joy which assure of our reconciliation, God pledges himself to fulfil the yearnings of our regenerate souls, and so turns our yearnings into active hopes.

These gifts of inward experience vivify the hope of a blessedness which shall endure beyond the grave. They are conveyed to that part of man's being in which his closest kinship to God consists, and carry the thought into the realms of the infinite. When God breathes this high spiritual benediction into the soul we begin to realise that we belong to the immortals. It was one of the limitations which belonged to the early stage of religious development that when men looked for the signs of God's favour in power, prosperity, abundance of corn and wine, such gifts were necessarily temporal and could convey no intimation of eternal well-being. It is otherwise with these inward blessings of joy and peace. Pleasures which appeal to the senses might conceivably be bestowed upon men as anodynes to assuage the bitterness of a coming death, but the gifts which enrich the innermost experience cannot lend themselves to any such narrow and earth-bound interpretation. The peace and joy which assure our salvation minister to the permanent and indestructible part of our being, and are pregnant with sacred and far-reaching hopes.

Sometimes these gifts are coincident with bodily pain and misfortune. This comfort which God gives to his chosen servants speaks of inexhaustible love, and the life must be endless through which that redeeming love is destined to flow. He would not brighten life with all this gladness unless it were His will to continue the work through the coming ages. These qualities of inward experience are signs of a growing law of benignity in the unopened chapter of our coming history. The transition before us for which these gifts compel us to hope is not greater than that which lies behind us in the past. Physiologists remind us that every form of life contains within itself unnumbered cells of the after lives which arise from it. And this peace which steals into the inward experience is the earnest of eternal peace, and this joy a foretaste of that which is at God's right hand, where all tears cease to flow. An inward experience enriched and vitalised by the comforts of an assuring spirit is the nursery of eternal hopes.

This spirit of inspired hope is the strength and stay of patience. The power to suffer aright depends upon this gift of character. However deep and full our inward experience, sooner or later things will come to us which will for the time seem entirely to change the aspect of life and

make an enormous demand upon our power to see through the darkness. There are people so morbidly constituted that they seem to have a perverted satisfaction in the pains and mischances of life, and are less happy in sunshine than in cloud. The temperament is well known to psychologists, and almost verges on a mild insanity. The man who is spiritually well balanced both feels his crosses and can at the same time rejoice in hope. Some crosses are made for us by God Himself, our neighbours make other crosses for us, and we make many for ourselves; but the crosses that press upon us most sharply are those which we must bear in the service of the kingdom of God. We need much strength to endure. It is only through the grace that is to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ that we are won to resignation and obedience in the midst of adverse providences. If suffering has ends to fulfil, if it can make us chastened, tender, submissive, if it can win us from our early pride, if it can add a new worth to our faith and a new honour to our toil, these ends can only be brought to pass through our patient continuance in well-doing, and patient continuance sustained by hope. But for the hope that enters into that within the veil, who would not slip his many burdens and anticipate the annihilation that is only too sure to come?

There are fragile works of the chisel and the graving tool that cannot be purified by fire, for they lack the fibre which can endure flame. The flame beautifies gold and silver because these precious metals have qualities which enable them to defy the destructive heat. And the fire will not purify us unless there be strong and tenacious qualities in our character, and these strong and tenacious qualities are vitalised by hope. In the day of tribulation we are saved by hope, and hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our heart. We need sharp discipline to fit us for our best work on earth as well as for the exalted ministries of heaven. Patience is the first and most essential thing if we are to profit by pain and mortification, and hope is the life-breath of true patience. Natural temperament will not perfect the work. We need the pentecostal baptism to fit us for dignified and cheerful suffering.

Evangelical experience is the one and only source of hope, hope for the moral improvement of the individual and hope also for the progressive welfare of the aggregate human family. The note of scientific scepticism is by no means buoyant and cheerful. The agnostic evolutionist declares that whilst the human race has advanced upwards in the past, there is no ascertainable reason why it should continue to do so through undetermined

periods of time. And society at large is more or less penetrated by this unhappy temper. It lies just beneath our flippancies and pleasure-hunting. We are passing through a strangely depressed atmosphere. Our very science is sick with the hopelessness that overtakes it in its reflective moods, and its temper affects the Church and brings discouragement if not actual stagnation. Let this mood master our modern life, and an Arctic winter will plant its white barriers and outworks round every field of benign service, and bring the death of all that is tender and unselfish. The abounding hope issuing from the bosom of a Church versed in the deeper experience of the spiritual life, is an inexhaustible and ever-flowing Gulf Stream, bringing light and warmth to realms that would otherwise be sterile and frost-bound. Let the Gulf Stream be diverted, and lands resonant with brooks and crimson with the wealth of fruit and flower will shudder back into stillness and Arctic death. Let the fulness of joy and peace in believing be disesteemed and accounted the vague sentiments of the pietist, and hope will cease, and if hope ceases, farewell to every movement which seeks to upraise and ennoble mankind.

This prayer entreats God to give joy and peace in richer measure. The believers in Christ at Rome had received the joy and the peace of the

gospel, but in varying and inadequate degrees. They had not been filled to the limit of the ministering Spirit's immeasurable love and power. The joy and peace of which they were partakers did not comprehend all that God had in store for them. There was an awaiting residue of spiritual gladness not yet vouchsafed. The tide of inward blessedness and consolation had not yet reached its high-water mark. There was an unseen line of evangelical privilege inscribed by God's hand up to which they had never for a moment risen. The promise of the gospel needed to be fulfilled like a sealed-up prophecy, and the time was at hand. The peace transcending knowledge, the joy unspeakable and full of glory, were glowing chapters awaiting their accomplishment. In respect to all these deeper experiences God as yet was but the God of hope. Ruling over every condition of human life, could He not put all fear to rest under His overshadowing wing? Blessed in His own essential nature from everlasting to everlasting, could He not impart some emanation of His own peculiar bliss and crown the joy of His people? Was the peace of the average disciple such as to exclude fear? The experiences of the Church were not up to the pitch at which God had tuned the evangelical conception of a believer's joy. There was a marked disparity between God's

counsels and their poverty-stricken realisations of those counsels. You may put a man down in an atmosphere that is as exhilarating as the finest wine, but if he has disease so that he can only breathe through some little bit of the lungs, he cannot feel the grand exhilaration in every vein. He must be healed, and drink it in deep draughts and at every pore if possible, so that he may revel in all the fulness of life. And so with the Church of God. The disease must pass away from its faith and life before it can be filled with the fulness of God and His eternal joy.

This benediction recognises an intimate relation between joy and hope. Natural causes sometimes tend to make men hopeful in temporal things. The thrill of perfect health, the sunshine of unchequered prosperity, a home life so tranquil that it has never provoked an anxious thought or a sleepless hour, will sometimes brace men to look into the future with cheerful and courageous anticipation. But true spiritual hopefulness can only be produced by spiritual processes. You might as well expect a lamp to burn in a vacuum as look for bright and glowing hope where there is no full effusion of spiritual joy and peace.

We shall see something of the relation that exists between peace and hope if we remember that peace is the fulfilment of a foregoing hope.

Peace and joy are accomplished prophecies within us, precious verifications of what was once a promise on God's part and an expectation on our own, before we had passed out of the stage of fear and bondage and pain. The restful and soul-contenting experiences of the new life are seals from God's hand assuring us that His promise is steadfast and that we did not hope in vain. And hope is thus strengthened by the honour put upon the past pledges of the Covenant. If a man has been doing business with some firm whose bills for twenty years past have been honoured to the day, he will anticipate with the most unquestioning confidence the strength and fidelity of the house in days to come. Every fresh transaction will become a new spur to his hope, if indeed it needed that incitement. What are the joy and peace that come to us through believing? Are they not accomplished hopes? And so they have the power of begetting an endless succession of hopes within us. Just as the creeping orchids in some tropical forest spread themselves from branch to branch and tree to tree till the dim arches are festooned with flowers, so must a penitent's hope pass into joy and the joy must become the root of new and ever-widening hopes, till every part of the life is bright with this divine efflorescence and no avenue of unlighted gloom is left. Joy and peace

are a harvest that grow from the seed of earlier hopes.

The fulness of joy and peace is a promise of good things to come. It suggests an anticipation of complete personal purity that we scarcely dare otherwise cherish. These things yield within the soul strength of incalculable vastness, strange power of detaching ourselves from the insidious entanglements of evil, and of loving God and serving man with undivided soul. Inward contentions often harass the man who has received some faint foretaste of rest. He wonders how he can ever love God with all his heart and escape the fleshly allurements that so damp and enfeeble his life. At last he is filled with all joy, and the attractions of the world and sin are more than outbalanced. It is said of one of the ancients that after he had heard music for the first time of quite novel melody and sweetness, he did not know the taste of food for many days. And so is it when the joy-giving God discourses His softest music to our inward ear. We shall no longer care for the mocking pleasures of sin. The man who has been thus filled has nothing to seek away from God. He is in little danger of entering upon some fresh pilgrimage of folly. He is not likely to lose himself again in the world. His nature has been perfectly tranquillised. He can dream of

no sweeter composure of spirit than that which is already his sure possession and experience. He can now fortify himself against the temptation of finding rest away from God. The man who has discovered rich veins of gold on his little patrimony will not be likely to forsake it for the distant prairie. The discovery binds him to the soil. He has all that he can want at home. The fulness of joy and peace will constitute a new bond attaching us by cords of inviolable strength to God. If linked always to God we may hope to share His life. The inspired and heavenward-lifted experience that was once our despair becomes our sober anticipation when the nature has been thus replenished from above. We abound in hope for ourselves because of this fulness of joy and peace.

VIII

GOD'S POWER IN THE PASSIVE GRACES

"Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness." —COL. i. 11.

PAUL is here speaking of a constant prayer he has been offering for the Colossian believers ever since he had heard of the new life of love that had been wrought within them by the Spirit. He desires that they may be filled with real spiritual knowledge and understanding. They were at times in danger of losing themselves in speculations which admitted of no final settlement, and which were more or less aloof from the standards of practical conduct they must set themselves to reach. This better knowledge would exclude the useless philosophies which could only bewilder the reason and which might perhaps lead them astray from the paths of Christian duty. And then he prays for their steadfast well-doing and consistent fruitfulness. It is better to act truly than to be speculative dreamers. And he desires that their patience and well-doing should be in just proportion and

balance to God's glorious power which is working within them. The plant that bears rare fruit must be acclimatised, and if it is not hardy enough to adapt itself to new conditions, the vitalising sap will flow through its cells in vain. By hardiness and self-restraint, by tenacious strength, the Christian life must acclimatise itself to the inhospitable conditions of this troubled world if it is to show the Divine virtues that are in it. They must retain their sense of the mercy which has fitted them to obtain a portion with the children of light and has translated them from bondage to the Evil One. The words of the text which extol the passive virtues of the Christian character prepare for this last topic. Those who are peevish and impatient under pain, rash and reckless under provocation, may find that the sacred memory of this translating grace has vanished from their hearts.

By patience the apostle means patience and resignation under the inevitable distresses of life. It is the temper in which a valiant Christian meets misfortune, the power of undespairing endurance under strain and tribulation. By long-suffering he means stability and quietness of spirit under provocation, self-restraint when the temptation to revengefulness comes. It is the temper in which a good man meets wrong-doing. Wherever these

passive virtues are developed the world will witness the moral miracle of men who can rejoice in tribulation.

Our admirations are commonly reserved for the active rather than the passive virtues. We idolise the man of movement, aggression, startling and romantic deed, but bestow scant admiration upon the rare saintliness which consists in silent endurance and long-suffering and reflects the glory of Jesus Christ. Persons who have little or no fight in them are frequently treated with ill-disguised contempt. The meek, dumb, unrepining burden-bearer, the man who recognises that life cannot be made all he would like it to be, and that an inequality is to be bravely put up with when it does not admit of immediate cure rather than be swept away, is regarded as a type of weakness. We prefer a benevolent pugnacity to the love that beareth all things, endureth all things, hopeth all things. The impression is that the world is not much better for its quiet sufferers. History immortalises chivalry, heroism, ostentatious martyrdom with a spice of devilry in it. In all this we view things from a coarse, utilitarian standpoint. Perhaps we delight in the mere spectacle of power rather than in the high ends to be compassed alike by doing and suffering. The fighting chieftains who find themselves idolised have often more devil

than saint in them. We think the glory of the God of battles illustrates itself in the noise and ostentatious daring of conflict, amidst social and political commotions rather than in the quiet processes which go on in the heart of His suffering servants. But God reserves His highest forthputtings of power to enable His servants to bear rather than to do. The force that sanctifies them in the midst of pain and reproach, that keeps them from becoming rebellious, is more than that which shatters empires and Christianises the traditions of a newly emergent world.

A little reflection may show us how far astray the popular judgment is; for to repress peevishness and recrimination in the midst of suffering and vexation implies a more masterly self-conquest than to rush blindly upon an assailant or to fight madly against the inevitable. This is the most searching test that can come to us. The man who judges moral values from the incidents of the battlefield would probably admit this. The soldier who is advancing towards an enemy's position and is told not to fire till he has come within a certain distance of the enemy, and who obeys orders in face of a blizzard of lead, is a finer example of heroism and self-control than the man who is frenzied from the moment he is told to advance into action. The latter diverts his own

thought by the impatient reprisals to which he lends himself, and there is something of the devil in him to aid and abet the reckless, undiscriminating fighting to which we give our admiration. If the tactics of the commander are to be carried to a successful issue, the soldier must crouch before the whirlwind of fire and hold his reprisals in reserve.

This was the special ordeal under which Simon Peter failed. There was perfect sincerity, although defective self-knowledge, in his boasts, and he could doubtless have gone with his Master to prison or to death if he might have been allowed to keep up his fighting to the last breath. His bit of a sword gave him courage and brought out his combative temper. But his difficulties began when he had to put away his weapon and quietly to exercise faith, patience, and long-suffering as he saw his Master the victim of brutality and his fellow-disciples brought into imminent peril. This wonder-working Master would neither do anything Himself nor let His disciples lift a hand. This intolerable strain brought into view the hidden weaknesses of the man. At a later stage he proved himself a greater man than would have been possible had he, as a Galilean brave, by a well-timed and happy blow rescued his Master from the hands of His oppressors.

By helping these passive virtues God is after all

helping the noblest and the most influential work of the world. The French troops could not do much in Tonquin because the men could not acclimatise themselves to the conditions in which they found themselves. This process of making His people patient and long-suffering is the process which fits them to do their work under inhospitable conditions, conditions in which angels would find themselves helpless, for, as we know, they have not had the discipline which gifts with passive virtues. An impatient and unduly forward tree is always sterile. Our forefathers, says Richard Jefferies, always planted their walnut trees on a north or north-eastern aspect. If planted in more genial positions, the silly trees would put forth their buds at the first breath of spring, and invite blight and barrenness. Fruit of the best flavour and timber of the rarest grain could always be grown in the teeth of the most cruel winds. And the noblest work must be done by the natures that suffer. We shall be nothing in Christ's kingdom unless we acquire these passive virtues. Pain helps our rarest fruitfulness and brings the most superb fibre grain to the character. When the end comes that will be found to be the fact, and glory will be proportioned to meekly endured pain.

Patience and long-suffering may be produced within men by very different processes. They are

sometimes the symptoms of natural decadence. The natures full of life and youth and impulse are sometimes the least capable of self-restraint. Impatience often makes the dashing fighter. The healthiest and most active and robust are least able to bear pain. If shut up for a few hours in a sick-room or debarred from their usual avocations, they become insufferably querulous. Played-out natures, natures toned down by the fret and worry of half a century, natures inured to defeat and disappointment, are sometimes very patient. They have scarcely nervous force left in them for a kick. The wizened are much-enduring. They have become too worn and languid to protest against wrong. And before nature has brought him down thus far on the hill of life, a man may sometimes school himself to it. There is a dogged endurance men of strong wills learn to acquire. They find fretfulness and complaining are impolitic. Their self-possession is complete. Scarcely any accumulation of vexing wrongs and disasters will intrude upon their philosophic calm. They have made up their minds to bear ill without wincing. It is a triumph of resolution. But when God's consummate power produces patience and long-suffering in the human soul, there is this distinguishing peculiarity about the result: these passive virtues are then associated with joyfulness. The believer is not only peaceful in

the midst of suspense or provocation, but his delight in God never fails. In the deepest night he can sing his song to the God of his life. When nature removes a man's peevishness and irascibility by wearing it out, it renders him at the same time incapable of joy. It bleeds and drains the man of the best forces of his vitality in making him unrepining. God does all this without bringing down the man's pulse or quenching his fire. With patience and long-suffering, joyfulness is conjoined; and when these three graces are in company you may be sure you have before you the work of God's mighty hand.

We sometimes think of these things as though they were scarcely necessary to an admirable character. We think there will not be much amiss with us if we are only good, honest, and affectionate —like Peter in his earlier discipleship. There is around us so much failure in essentials that if we have the sound framework of character we may be content to forget all about its skin-deep embellishments. It will be enough if we are free from guile and gross passion. Let us only be right with the broad Decalogue, and we need not trouble with these finer trifles that go to the making of a perfect character. We will be content to be like our own sea-girt isle. It has a measurably fertile and productive soil and can bear not a few fruits, so we

will not trouble much about the atmosphere that surrounds. You may have a soil with many useful qualities in it, even if you cannot guarantee the sunshine and the soft balm of the Levant. Well, God does not think patience and long-suffering trifles. Out of the fulness of His strength He helps men to their attainment. If a general sends out a picked regiment to win some position on the battlefield, you may safely conclude that he thinks the position one of immense importance. Otherwise he would never risk the cream of his army in the endeavour to capture it. So when God lends His very highest power to this issue (and Paul does not assume it can be compassed in any other way) you may conclude that the possession of patience and long-suffering is all-important from God's point of view.

Patience and long-suffering with all joyfulness imply a great victory over inward forces. God does not demean His power by lending it to such a significant victory. We do not like to recognise that our hearts are camps and strongholds of portentous evil. But so it is. The powers marshalled in us are many and formidable as those leagued against us. Legion never goes out of a man till he possesses the very last of these passive virtues. We like to think that we incline of ourselves to what is right, and that without any extraordinary

measure of supernatural help we can keep these rebel powers in check. To be patient and long-suffering belongs to the ideal of a gentleman, and society does not generally recognise that the very glory of God's power must come into play to help a man to that delicate self-suppression and calm self-control we describe by the gentleman's name. The conquest of spite, irritability, peevishness may sometimes be more apparent than real. Indeed, it is always so where any power less than that of Omnipotence comes into play, for there may be the cool tongue and the smiling face where the heart is fretted with unbelieving haste and ink-black with the wrath that courses through it. Think of what strongholds have to be won before a man can be truly patient and long-suffering. No proud nature can be patient. It will regard it as an affront to have to wait. It feels outraged if it cannot step at once into all it wants. All the power of Lucifer within us must needs be foiled. No man can realise this conception of resignation and unmurmuring love in whom there is the slightest spirit of self-righteousness. A man in whom there is a vein of self-complacency will think that he ought to be in a perfect world in which honours rather than humiliations are lavished upon him. He should shine as the constellations of heaven, and never be under the shadow of unjust

reproach. We instinctively resist both physical and mental pain. The world asserts that wrong should be resisted, not borne. That is the secret of its revolt against a God who seems to plunge His creatures into pain and leaves them to drill themselves into patience. God magnifies His power when He prevails against immeasurable egotism, selfish pride, revolt against pain; for these things have a demoniac force about them, nay, indeed, they are clothed with the attributes of one made a little lower than God.

IX

ELECT THROUGH PAIN

"I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."—ISA. xlviii. 10.

IN studying Jewish history we find that the opening of its brightest pages is always preceded by an ordeal of pain, depression, reproach. It was when the descendants of Abraham, the wealthy and honoured prince of the desert, had been trampled beneath the heel of oppression that God set His love upon them as a race and separated them to service. And centuries later it was at a period when God had cast them off for an interval for their frequent apostasies, and when their fortunes in Babylon had touched as low a depth as in Egypt of old, that God chose them again and raised them to the supreme honour of giving to mankind its true King and Saviour. These Divine acts of election seem to be typical of God's methods with both the individual and the community. God chastens with iron sternness, and plunges into abysses of self-abasement the man on whose

work He is about to set the special mark of His approval. The rod that lacerates and the seal that accredits and instals are never far off from each other in God's strange economies. Moses was fetched for his heroic work from the hardship and penury and repression of the desert. David was chosen in his life of hairbreadth escapes and pitiless persecution to prepare the golden age of Israel. Paul was summoned in unhealed blindness and prostration to lead the chosen heralds whose august vocation it is to evangelise the Gentile world. And it was just as true of Jesus Christ as of the race from which He sprang that God chose Him in the furnace of affliction. It was when despised of men and to all appearance cast off by God, that the throne He was to fill gleamed into view and He was exalted above all visible and invisible worlds. And this history is perpetually repeating itself in the individual lives of Christ's disciples. It is when the destinies are overcast, when lacerated by keen discipline, when the excellent of the earth wear sackcloth and are half dumb because their hopes have been stifled, that God bids the dayspring shine into their lives and lavishes upon them the highest honours of His household.

Even at the very close of life God often brings His servants into a new tribulation. It is in the

furnace of a fierce fever or a wasting affliction that God finally chooses them for honour and immortal coronation in His presence. Eliphaz the prophet, who had supernatural visions and yet groped like a common blunderer in expounding the ways of providence, told Job that if he would only confess his shortcomings and put himself right with God "he should come to the grave in a full age like as a shock of corn cometh in his season." The metaphor is so beautiful that it ought to be true. We speak of good old saints fading painlessly out of life like the hectic leaves of a gorgeous autumn. But the golden and russet dyes of the changing foliage blind us to the humiliation of decay, and if tree branches had nerves as sensitive as ours no such halo might seem to wreathe the death-bed of the summer as we, cheap poets that we are, find there. A quiet, painless end, like a Canadian summer, is not the average destiny of goodness. Perhaps, indeed, the words of Eliphaz more frequently came true in his day than in ours. Western civilisation produces more disease than it cures, and makes us sensitive to pain in degrees unknown to the outdoor patriarchs. I cannot find in the Old Testament a death-bed so sad from the physical standpoint as many a death-bed by which I have to minister. Many a man who has bowed meekly to the Divine rod through-

out life, and come out of every trial with tenderer sympathy and more exalted faith, and character mellower and more richly beautified, finds that he has not done with chastisement to the very last. Upon the Christian death-bed there is the light of a more perfect triumph, but there is often the shadow of a more racking pain. The cases in which the worthiest people die painlessly are the exceptions, not the rule. Saints are not always garnered as painlessly as the sheaves of the harvest men. Nerves and sinews and susceptibilities are stretched and strained through sleepless weeks and months. Death seems to play with victims as wild beasts with their prey.

This fact is meant to convey its lesson to the bystanders. The lesson in connection with the history of God's ancient people is indicated in the context. "For My praise will I refrain from thee that I cut thee not off." "For Mine own name's sake, even for My own sake will I do it." It is God's purpose in all this to magnify His grace and faithfulness. The tie between the heathen man and his god is almost always a tie that is formed in the days of his prosperity. In heathen communities the flood-tide of prosperity always washes up a few new gods, and the ebb of the tide almost always carries them away out into neglect and oblivion again. The pagan will remind his

god how he kept it richly gilded and brilliantly painted in the days of his prosperity, how he fed it on the daintiest odours and poured out generous drink-offerings in its presence. He will chide it for ingratitude as though he were the benefactor in the transaction, and reproach it as he would reproach his fair-weather friends. You see, a relation of that sort is never likely to endure, and idolatry must pass through fatal change with every turn of fortune. We sometimes say there are no friendships like those formed in the days of adversity, for the very foundations of the friendship are tested at the beginning. And God did not choose His people for friendship with Himself in the time of their prosperity. The epochs in which He designated them for new love and favour were the epochs when they were slaves, incapable of building Him costly temples, or serving Him with a cultured ritual—indeed, when they were not free to worship Him at all. God must put His love above reproach and suspicion. He must lift His character above the level of the heathen Pantheon. And to do this He takes hold of His people in the time of their dire shame and tribulation. He reminds the world that it is for His own name's sake. He lays the deep, strong foundation of an everlasting friendship with His people by helping them when there is none other at hand to

succour them, and when they could not requite His favour.

And is there not something like this in the way in which God deals with his individual servants in the last stages of their earthly history? God gives us tragic hints of the fact that He bases His most sacred and enduring relations with His people upon the help He renders to them in the days of their last darkness and woe, rather than upon any service they are able to render to Him. Heathenism maintains that the saint rich in good works will die a painless death, and that his flesh will be miraculously guarded against putrefaction. I have been to see the mummies of Buddhist priests which have been made the objects of worship on the ground that their saintliness preserved them from decay. And we find some defective forms of Christianity leavened with the idea that saintship is meritorious, and that its due recompense is a painless death and partial exemption from the common lot of corruption. To remind men how absolutely dependent they are for their salvation upon His own free grace, God very often seems to scourge and afflict and humiliate His purest people at the end of their work and ministry. We need to be guarded against the danger of canonising godly friends after they have passed away. As they reach the close of life they attain their

highest glory and exaltation of character. Their very sufferings ennoble them in our view, and we are predisposed to honour them as we have never honoured them in life. We are apt to speak of their good works as though they had a redemptive quality in them, and of their saintliness as though it had its root in themselves rather than in grace. And God has to remind us, and to remind us by the voices of pain and humiliation, that they belong to an apostate race, and hang like all others upon the hope of His mercy alone. He is not going to carry out His punitive rights, but He lays sore afflictions upon His very best people to remind them that He possesses those rights, and that whoever is saved is saved by His tender compassions. He brings them into straits where they are obviously helpless to render Him a single service or ministry, and then saves them in their extremity by His sovereign love alone. "I have chosen thee . . . "

And the lesson that God teaches to the bystanders He is doubtless teaching in His own inward and impressive fashion to the elect sufferer himself. The long struggle with disease and death disciplines in humility and calls forth a faith in which there is no evil compound or qualification. The sufferer is reminded how little he can claim in his own right from God, and how absolutely he must yield himself up

to the love and mediation of another. In the fire of the last affliction, faith in the saving grace of God is separated from the dross that is apt to adulterate it. At the close of a life of unblemished integrity and good works the temptation to Pharisaism is apt to return with redoubled power, or at least the rational materials of temptation are present in more abundant degree. It needs a fool to pose as a Pharisee at the outset of a religious life. At the beginning there is no high triumph upon which any sober man would pride himself. The future with its sad perils and possibilities is an untrodden path. But when the end comes in view the retrospect of a well-ordered life may have its subtle and insinuating perils. Passions have been successfully ruled, and the career has been free from the stain of grave outward culpability. And besides that, the poor have been comforted, the weak hands strengthened, the fatherless and the widow visited and made glad. And in view of all this, unless God plant His safeguard of lacerating thorns, the spirit may wander away into gratulation and self-worship. The least taint of that temper will make a character unlovely. We can never be altogether lovable to God till the last strain of self-complacency is taken out of our natures, and God often effects this excision by the sharp ordeal of the last tribulation. The very

affliction that renders the earthly form unlovely crowns the perfect charm of the soul before God. In the last term of life, when satisfaction with the past might seem most natural and reasonable, God effectually guards against it by reminding of human frailty.

The helplessness of the last affliction into which God brings His servants makes its appeal to the richest compassions of the Most High. No one will misunderstand the paradox when I say that the strongest thing in the world is helplessness. In every man there is something that responds to dumb appeal and sheer defencelessness. When the heart of Jonah seems shut in by ignoble and cruel prejudice, God draws his argument and appeal from the helpless babes of Nineveh. I may be reminded of exterminating wars in which the appeal of the dumb babe has been unavailing. That, however, was not owing so much to the lack of natural pity in the warrior as to dread of the thought that obligations of revenge descend with the blood, and that there could be no security for the future apart from clean extermination. In all ages, amongst all races, the appeal of helplessness has always proved itself strangely eloquent and persuasive. One of Bret Harte's best known stories describes the way in which a mob of coarse, debauched, poker-playing miners were

humanised and made tender for the time being by the charge of a motherless babe that came to their hands. You have heard again and again of the care of some rough sailor for a forlorn infant. The appeal of helplessness can open up strange feelings in hearts into which neither logic nor fear nor sentiment could force an entrance. The sight of helplessness unseals a strange wealth of compassion in the most evil souls. The inherited instincts of a thousand fatherhoods rise up within us and speak. And God will not be outdistanced by evil men. The argument is one from the less to the greater. What plenitude of grace will the appeal of sheer helplessness open in the heart of God! God suffers his best loved people to be cast into this utter tribulation at last so that they may learn to plead with Him by their very helplessness, and so come to find that the prayer is more eloquent and persuasive than all the supplications of the past. God's heart perhaps never goes so entirely out to His people as in the last hours when they are abandoned to His solitary succour.

In the last fiery furnace God's people acquire a depth and fulness of sympathy that specially fits them to be instruments in God's future plans. Those accustomed to visit sick people cannot fail to observe the interest they always feel in fellow-sufferers. More inquiries are heard concerning

those who are distant companions in sorrow than ever come from the lips of those in perfect strength. The experience of pain has enabled them to enter more tenderly and with more realistic appreciation into the woes of others. And can we doubt that sympathy with the one great Sufferer of all time is strangely deepened by the silent lessons God teaches His saints in their last days through their final pains? They begin to realise as never before all that the Saviour of men endured, and enter into an unknown oneness with His sufferings. And they attain an inexpressible dearness to God because of this oneness with His Son. It is the step that fits them to ascend His throne and enter into all the working problems of His mediatorial ministry. God can never choose imperfect instruments for the work of the skies, however freely He may employ them here. We are apt to use this word perfect in too narrow a sense. Some of us seem to suppose it means sinless. It means more than that, for Christ, always sinless, was made perfect through suffering. He was perfect in his relation to the law before He began to suffer; but till He had been bound to the Cross and tasted the wormwood and the gall He was not perfect in relation to the redemptive and mediatorial offices that were before Him. Through the grace of his Lord and Saviour a man may become perfect in relation to

the law by which he has to guide himself, and at the same time not be perfect in relation to the unknown ministry which God is about to put upon him in the realms of the unseen. The last tribulations to which God sometimes exposes His holiest people gives the crowning fitness for the unrevealed purposes of the future. The tribulations through which the multitudes before the throne have passed may be scarcely less necessary to fit them for their service there than the sacrifice that made their raiment white.

The call of God in affliction has been coming of late to many of you, a call to those who, if they are on God's side, are undeclared, a call to those who have lost the passion of their first love, and who, if not failing of final salvation, may very possibly lose their highest crown. The disregarded call may provoke the Divine displeasure, but the reverently heeded call may make us possessors of God's favour in surpassing degree. Sickness has been sweeping through our midst and has struck down many in every congregation. It is a summons to more zealous service, more diligent and comprehensive consecration, and wider and more grateful fruitfulness. See to it that the occasion is not wasted, and the voices that speak in the chastening are not drowned in the hum and uproar of the excited world. Unless

we watch and pray, it may be said of the ministry of affliction as of the Lord's personal ministry itself, "Many are called, but few are chosen." What a blessing if you are able to look upon the time of your physical prostration as a new starting-point in spiritual experience, holy temper and conduct, conspicuous and extended usefulness! It will be your fault and not the absence of God's goodwill in these things if it is not so. Let a better life, a more strenuous endeavour, date itself from the closing months of this year, and the word shall be fulfilled again, "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."

X

THE REALMS OF COMFORT

"Walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost."—ACTS ix. 31.

THIS verse announces two vital facts, and emphasises the twin conditions upon which they rest. The early believers in Jesus Christ were built up into strength and spiritual beauty, and their numbers also were greatly multiplied. Such results and the causes which produced them are alike inseparable. The "fear," which it was the special work of the Old Dispensation to call forth, and the "comfort," issuing from the great truths of the New Dispensation, merge into each other and dominate the genius of the new Christian society as it emerges from its first cruel ordeal of persecution.

In every sphere of our life we live by contrasts, in the spiritual no less than in the temporal. Holy fear and sacred comfort must blend and combine, thus forming the new atmosphere in which believers have their daily conversation. He

who allows thoughts of God's majesty and austere righteousness to pass out of his mind will have at best a faint sense of the grace and soul-sustaining presence of the Comforter. The Divine Spirit can only shed His solace about our pathway and distil His incomparable secrets into our soul when our temper is marked by reverence for the Lord, a lowly sense of His Sovereignty, implicit subjection to His requirements, and a dread lest we should grieve His goodness and be bereft of His companionship, for such a dread lies at the core of all true and exalted love. The fine, vital atmosphere which enspheres a virile, fruit-bearing Christian life must be constituted of things which seem more or less antithetic—"fear" and "comfort." This is the law by which we must walk, the environment within which we must abide. The fear of the Lord fits us to relish the mystic comforts of the Spirit. It gives edge to our sensibilities, and attunes our natures to a true appreciation of the Divine gentleness.

What is this vital, pervasive, soul-fortifying gift so richly bestowed on the churches of Judea, Galilee, Samaria, in the midst of which they had their daily walk and conversation? It was more than the pause from daily panic and distress which ensued when the cruel rage of the first persecution had spent itself. The believing multitudes might

well revel in the holy and blessed calm which came after months and years of terror. When the buffetings of such a red, raging tempest ceased, who would not drink in with eager delight the Sabbatic peace of the new dawn? Less deep and spiritual natures of the first disciples might have been content with this amelioration in the outward lot of the Church. But it was not enough that they should enjoy the ease and prosperity of a new decade. Comfort is more than solace, a mystic antidote to pain, a healing balm for sore and burning wounds. Of course it was this; for He who came as the substitute of Jesus Christ could not do otherwise than bring consolation and breathe His rare and welcome sympathies into all troubled and mourning souls. But it was much more.

The presence of the Comforter was a pledge of established peace with God, and conveyed a new sense of strength. In the days of persecution how often did the adversary point to the miseries of the disciples and assert that God was against this unhappy and misguided community of people, and that they were vainly calling themselves His elect servants. To a man of fatalistic and desponding temper, accustomed to interpret the Divine favour by worldly standards, such a reproach might sometimes have occasioned much fear and misgiving.

But the inward voice of the Comforter, heard when the fury of the storm was stilled, sufficiently answered these disquieting comments on their misfortunes. The new consciousness, quickened by His breath, could find no place for guilty dread, and bore clear witness to the removal of sin and wrath. Jesus had absolved the contrite with no "ifs" or "buts" in His message, and the Spirit perpetuated His work in the same authoritative and unfaltering terms. The messenger who carries a reprieve to some poor, distraught, terror-stricken transgressor, half fool and half offender, shuddering in the condemned cell, would prove a poor comforter if he had an impediment in his speech and prolonged the suspense by halting preliminaries and roundabout explanations in announcing the good news. By announcing, in Christ's name, clear and ringing as a trumpet note, the Spirit braces the souls within which He broods, and fills them with strength and triumph. He dispels the fear which hath torment, for He shows the height and depth of God's love, thus perfecting the love of the believer. In the subtle spheres of emotion, within which He enshrines Himself, unrest dies away and its insidious causes cease to act. He opens up to the soul the springs of an inviolable life. Where He abides, gladness, love, strength, prevailing power arise. He builds up the timid

by making it see those visions of the forgiving God which Moses saw when, in response to his prayer, the space out of which he looked from the cleft of the rock became luminous with the infinite love.

The Spirit diffuses comfort in the hearts which receive Him and enter into the spheres which are tremulous with His influence because He gives full access to God by helping the disciples' infirmities. Such an ordeal as that through which the early churches passed up to the time of Paul's conversion might have weakened confidence in their own election and destroyed all faith in the power of prayer. It is true Stephen was filled with the Holy Ghost in scenes of riot and blood-shed, and saw a straight path to the throne of God, but for less heroic souls the tragedies of those times must almost have blotted out God, and threatened the possibility of communion with His life. Discouraged and desponding souls sometimes echoed the plaint of the Psalmist and asked, Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath He in anger shut up His tender mercies? But the Spirit helped men in whom, because of the weakness of the flesh and the oppression of appalling discouragements, prayer might otherwise have ceased. He kept the disciples in fellowship with the Father through the storm—and no heart is quite forlorn which is so kept—and He continued to keep them when the

storm was overpast. He counteracted innate weakness and kept them from sinking into a prayerless state, or into a state where prayer seemed fated to barrenness. He was true to His own name and office as Paraclete, and the soul of the Church was strong because He was at its side, called to aid and invigorate by conveying into the saints the virtue of the great intercession in heaven.

The new note of gladness in the Churches was due in part to the fact that the Spirit was raising them into more perfect fitness for the demands of their appointed service. New manifestations of the power of the Spirit came into their experience, an earnest of the day when they should prove themselves conquerors of those who for the time seemed to hold in their hand all the ruling forces of the present world. Under this inspiration they could bless those who had reviled and evil-intreated them. Wherever the Spirit creates the instinct of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His cause He also bestows the power of carrying out its behests. To breathe into the disciples their Master's passion of pity, and then to leave them with half-paralysed faculties of service, would have been to ply them with needless torture. To stir the deep tidal emotion of pity for men, to elicit the sympathies of believers by putting before them a portentous panorama of woe, and then to tie their hands and

deprive them of competence for wrestling with the dark, oppressive problem, would be wasteful and sacrilegious wantonness. No soul distress is more sickening than that which arises as we look at some prescribed labour which confronts us for which we are altogether unequal. The love quickened within us by the Spirit must be followed by power to help and deliver, or love itself becomes a pain and a heart wound, and a true Church is in no sense comforted. Comfort means a discerning courage. In this new realm in which they walked they acquired that unblenching boldness to meet their adversaries which had marked the apostles after the Pentecost. The demoniac forces which had run riot through the years of persecution might have aroused panic and possessed them with that sense of unutterable terror which sometimes comes to the brave man in the dreams and blackness of the night. But by moving in this lofty realm they acquired freedom from shamefacedness, and reached the sublime assurance which was a note of the first witnesses of the resurrection.

This happy experience into which they were brought implied clear and enlarging views of truth. Ignorance makes the comfort here spoken of quite impossible. Our minds are never quite at ease whilst we are treading a strange path in an unknown wilderness, especially if the darkness falls

and shuts us in with its terrors. We fear to move a single step lest we should drop into a pitfall or plunge unawares over a precipice. But we are comforted by the rising sun. We know what kind of a world we are in, and can choose the path it is best to take. And the larger and clearer hemispheres of truth created for us by the Spirit of light and wisdom solace and satisfy our souls. One or two men who have lost religious faith tell us the change was painless, and they are still optimists. For most men such a change is a plunge into darkness and inconsolable distress. It is a terrifying imprisonment, with no message from the outlying world, if the great problems of God, the coming life and the destiny of the soul, are left without any hint of a solution. We are as much the victims of fear as those who have to grope their way through a world from the perception of whose qualities they are debarred by the loss of the senses. The consolations of the disciples deepen as the Spirit fulfils the word of Jesus and guides men into all truth.

This comfort of the Spirit was not an ecstasy into which the early believers sometimes rose, as with the Apostle Paul when he was caught up into the third heaven, but the sphere in which their common life was passed. It was poured forth with such lavish and abiding bounty that it invested

the pathway by which they moved with a sea of vital elixir and became the sign of an ever-present God. It followed them like a favouring wind, brooded around them in all the circles of their thought and action like a tonic, strength-supplying air charged with immortal secrets. It was not a gift to be found only in the upper room, but something in which their lives were lapped and laved when they found themselves in scoffing crowds or had to stand before mighty and unscrupulous adversaries. In such ceaseless and unstinted measure does the Holy Ghost pour forth the treasures of His benediction. In some fever-swamps of the tropics little groves of eucalyptus are planted, and round the retreats for consumptives are belts of pine-wood in which those threatened with death walk day by day. But the victims of disease cannot always live in eucalyptus groves and pine-woods. Sometimes, perhaps, they have to breathe medicated air through the spout of a kettle, or they must even be kept alive at times by a supply of artificial oxygen. The scanty way in which some spiritual valetudinarians imbibe comfort, gladness, inspiration, is just as pathetic. They get slender, ghostly, ineffectual threads of it in their infrequent prayers, or as they wait together in the courts of God's house. At the best they sniff the scent of the eucalyptus grove or the pine-

wood when the wind happens to be in the right direction. It is difficult to carry this grace into common life, to find strength, solace, exhilaration as stable under all circumstances and as sufficient as the supply of common air natural in the model house of a Garden City. But the Holy Spirit puts great, deep, plenteous zones of it about the daily pathway of those who devote themselves to the spiritual life, and the sum total of the being with all its conscious powers may be immersed in these gladdening inspirations. The comfort of the Spirit is not something to be enjoyed in golden hours and inhaled at far-off intervals, just as we catch the scent of rose and lavender when a holiday ramble takes us by the hedge of an old-fashioned country garden. It is the pervading atmosphere in which it is our privilege to walk, the climate of the Garden City into which God invites us to move. This comfort is not the incense of the sanctuary only, but a sweetness that must shed itself through home, workshop, market-place, and every scene into which duty takes us, a large and illimitable realm in which we may walk.

Whilst this experience of the Early Church begins in a receptive state of mind, it can only be maintained and increased under conditions of practical activity. To walk in the comfort of the Holy Ghost is to absorb its grateful virtues into

the life, and the limit of the absorption-point is soon reached, unless the passive attitude of the soul is followed by a diligent fulfilment of the works of the Spirit. When a sick man breathes medicated air as an antidote to disease the process must be more or less intermittent, and the benefit which results is partial; but when he can move in an atmosphere charged with the elements necessary for the removal of his ailments the entire life becomes permeated with that which Nature requires for her recuperative processes. Walking accelerates the inspirations and compels a man to take in richer draughts of health if the climate is right. It opens the pores, which act as helpers to the lungs, and enlarges the intake of life from the outside stores. With movement and patient energy a thousand avenues open to welcome the exhilarating streams of health which are flowing on every side. And thus is it with the man who fulfils the works of the Spirit, and walks thereby in the comfort of the Holy Ghost. This ministry is something that should always enswathe us, a mystic essence we must never cease to inhale, a holy atmosphere which must beset all our goings out and comings in, and pervade our conduct through the various and taxing engagements of each succeeding day. Comfort must be the sacred sphere within which we live. It must vitalise our

restless thoughts and our ever-changing moods. It must be the invisible secret of our glad and praiseful lives. Practical duties are just as necessary for its permanence as habits of contemplation. In this domain of spiritual gladness let us live and move and breathe till all the tissues of the character are changed and renewed, and we become meet subjects for the kingdom of eternal joy. As the friction of the wind upon the grass and trees is said to do the work of a dynamo and beget unknown stores of electric energy, so the movement of the Spirit upon our thoughts and lives as we follow the occupations of the field and the workshop will evoke force, gladness, mystic vitality. And thus shall we be built up.

To walk in spiritual comfort of course means an unbroken and full-souled reception of it. There must be no half-hearted faith, no congestion of the powers which appropriate Divine gifts, no rigidity. It is only too possible for us, by worldliness, by unbelief, by coarse aims and views, to lose our capacity for receiving the Spirit, even whilst its gracious ministrations still encompass us on every side. In the hospitals of some of the Staffordshire towns men are to be found who are dying of what is known as "potter's lung." These poor victims of disease have had to work for years in atmospheres charged with fine particles of flint and clay,

and perhaps sometimes have been careless in using the defences provided against the deadly peril ; so that little by little these floating particles have lodged themselves in the tissues and vessels of the lungs till at last those organs, the mainspring of health, have become as stiff as petrifactions and quite incapable of doing their appointed work. When that stage is reached the lung can no more do its part in the work of life than a palsied hand can lift a burden. Remove such a man to Bournemouth, to Egypt, to Algeria, provide for him a sea voyage, and the most genial and salubrious air the earth can offer will be useless. The lung cannot take in and assimilate the virtues of oxygen, and the poor man is no better off than in the shed of a Staffordshire pottery. He has moved and wrought and breathed for years in an atmosphere the ingredients of which have choked, clogged, destroyed the vital mechanism, and disqualified it for its delicate and important tasks. And so with those who move in atmospheres charged with the dust of this world's cares and the clogging poisons of its carnivals. Unless there be great watchfulness the power of spiritual intake and assimilation may be completely lost. We go in our pride and selfishness into rooms which will soon undo for ever the work of the upper room. The soul may become rigid, the range of its action be narrowed, and its elasticity

and accommodation power be finally lost. If we are to keep our capacity for such high and ennobling inspirations as came to the Early Church, we must avoid every haunt of vitiated moral feeling, every retreat of the worldling and the unbeliever, the seat of the scornful wherever it is placed. When once our capacity to receive spiritual inspiration is gone, when this congestion of the higher part of the nature has taken place, when the range of the spiritual functions has been shut in to extinction-point, no matter how fair and health-giving the new environment to which we may remove it will be in vain. Let us watch over ourselves so that we may ever walk in those realms of comfort and felicity created by the breath of the Divine Spirit.

XI

THE MINISTRY OF THE SPIRITUAL

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness."—GAL. vi. 1.

THE recurrence of inconsistency and even scandal in the life of the Christian community is a disheartening incident which always has to be reckoned with. It is quite possible for us to get into the habit of looking for a happy condition of things in the Church on earth which will only be realised in the faultless and triumphant Church of heaven. We desire a membership like the machine for which the manufacturer longs—faultless in its movements, so self-adjusting that it all but takes the place of human supervision, and rarely if ever breaks down. Our quest of this convenient perfection is disappointing, for some of Christ's followers have a tendency to go wrong and collapse, perhaps disastrously, and that more than once or twice in the course of their religious history. Perhaps we blame the methods of conversion for

such mishaps. We say, on the one hand, that crude revival converts, subjected to extreme momentary excitement and imperfectly instructed, are sure to fail after a while sooner rather than later. If, on the other hand, we are in sympathy with special revival movements, we are apt to blame the quieter methods through which people are gathered into the Church, and assume that the nature has not been agitated and radically changed. It is not enough, we plead, to train and indoctrinate, but the sensibilities must be ploughed to their utmost depths and the life entirely recast by the down-rush of revolutionary forces from the Unseen. Such pleas are irrelevant on whichever side they are used, for, as a matter of fact, the breakdowns come impartially and have no discernible connection with the methods through which men and women are brought into the Church. No evangelism makes impeccable saints by the first processes of its ministry. Of the accessions which came with the Pentecost at Jerusalem it is simply said, "The Lord added to the Church such as were being saved." After their first admission into the fellowship doubtless many of them had to be picked up again and again out of the mire. Men and women are brought into the Church to be watched over, admonished, helped to their feet again when they have stumbled, and not to be show converts who

will gratify our sense of Church pride by their exact and irreproachable conduct.

And this ministry which makes such stressful demands upon us is as necessary for our own spiritual perfecting as for the protection and nurture of the weak themselves. The idea of a self-minding Church, a well-compacted society that will keep itself right without imposing care, strain, oversight upon others, a spiritual mechanism that needs neither watching nor readjustment, is against the facts, and if it were possible would still make for spiritual atrophy. We shall never get it in this imperfect world, and if we did secure our heart's desire we should miss one of the motive forces of our spiritual perfecting.

The word "brethren," which introduces the appeal, strikes the keynote of the argument, for brethren cannot be made or unmade at will. Amongst Eastern nations community of food established a kinship supplementary to that of blood. The Arab to-day holds himself bound to extend his favour and protection to the man with whom he has feasted in his tent till three days after his departure from the roof under which he was a guest. The idea underlying the custom is that a tie of secondary blood brotherhood exists whilst any food received in the tent of the host remains in the veins and tissues of

the body. The bond between us and those with whom we have had communion in the presence of our Lord is not ended by what may prove only a temporary aberration from the best standards of Christian conduct, however grievous and exasperating the lapse may be. Whilst any residuum of the truth which saves remains in the heart and conscience of those overtaken in a fault we must recognise the obligation growing up out of our participation in the one bread and the one blood. Perhaps the bond is not finally dissolved till the pilgrimage of life has closed in ignominy and spiritual darkness. The Psalmist, after confessing that he had gone astray like a lost sheep, prays God to seek his servant, for he did not forget God's commandments. Or—to put the idea in a yet stronger form—Christian discipleship implies incorporation into the body of which Christ Jesus is the head, and he who falls into transgression has not lost the possibility of a revived readjustment with the sacred functions of that body. Bishop Lightfoot tells us that the Greek word for "restore" means, in its primitive etymology, to set a bone or put back into its right place a dislocated joint. Now, whilst it may sometimes be a duty to the body to cut off a part in which actual mortification has set in, the readjustment where the condition is not obviously hopeless is

a duty devolving upon those who have the necessary qualifications for the task. The derangement may be set right and the lost function recovered. Our obligation to those who stumble does not end with the discovery of their offence, but assumes a more sacred and solemn meaning. Their admission into Church fellowship involved an exchange of ratifications, putting duties upon the Church as well as upon themselves.

Whilst this task is of urgent obligation, it is also immense in its difficulties, and demands qualifications of surpassing delicacy. We may perhaps think it is a much easier thing to restore a man who has fallen, and give him his lost place in the economies of the Church, than to bring a man straight out of a life of sin into habits of godliness. But whilst on the one hand there are indestructible memories in the soul of a man who has tasted the powers of the world to come, on the other hand we find ourselves face to face with a mental sensitiveness in the fallen disciple which makes him an exceedingly difficult subject to handle. He has grown accustomed to a new rôle or classification in the Christian society and almost claims it as an indefeasible right. The old unregenerate Pharisaism often puts forth new shoots from the stock which should have been uprooted by his conversion. To treat him as a common sinner

may be accepted as a grave offence and call forth the rage of wounded pride. He has lost, moreover, the temper which once helped him to bear rebuke, and indeed to welcome it, whilst he was a loyal member of the believing brotherhood, seeking honestly to know himself and to press on after the highest spiritual perfection he could conceive. He is perhaps poised between self-justification and despair. He is intent upon maintaining his self-respect; and to do that he must blame the religion which has permitted him to fall. Religion, he is ready to say, ought to bring a man into a sphere where he will be as secure against sin as if he were made and kept virtuous by a law of natural necessity. If evangelical religion cannot do this for him it is perhaps scarcely worth while giving it a second trial. In such an idea many will be ready to encourage him. They assert that a universal religion ought to accommodate itself to the line of least resistance in human nature. His position is so ticklish and perilous that unsuitable treatment may either exasperate into resentment or put into his soul fuel which will feed the smouldering fires of black, torturing despair. Harshness, unjust reproach, recrimination, any superior assumption on the part of the man who assumes the office of restorer, will do mischief rather than effect good. The task of fulfilling

our obligation to those in fellowship with us, but who have passed under a cloud of greater or less density, is arduous and complex, and yet must not be declined. It is no average believer of meddlesome and officious temper, no careless and prayerless type of Christian, no pass-in-the-crowd man who can do this work. Special endowments must be sought and must always be in possession, ready for use, if this momentous enterprise is to be brought to a successful issue.

The apostle singles out for this delicate and vital work those who are spiritual in temper and habit of mind, a qualification which lends itself to plain and simple tests. The word has been regarded by some as denoting supernatural endowments, those special gifts of the Spirit of God which excited so much wonder in some of the apostolic churches. But such an interpretation of the word narrows the call to this important ministry, and would leave places in which miraculous gifts were meagrely bestowed without any suitable agency for the recovery of the lapsed disciples. Moreover, those endowed with the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit were not always preeminent for the meekness requisite for this work. It is those who are spiritual in the ethical rather than in the thaumaturgical sense who are summoned to meet these emergencies. The spiritual

man is one who, in his prevailing modes of thought and feeling, has become subdued and sensitive to the will of the all-surrounding Spirit of God. Spirituality arises not from a quality of temperament, but from a receptive habit of soul. The spiritual man is steeped in the fulness of the Divine life, and his dispositions are assimilated to those dispositions of gentle and tender helpfulness which have their home in God and are conveyed by His Spirit to others. The Spirit puts His own impress upon the man who is designated to this Christlike work of readjustment and restoration. Character constitutes the only fitness for this task, and official authority without character will be as useless for the salvation of one who has lapsed into sin as an ancestor's diploma of surgery in the hands of a colour-sergeant in the hospital tent on the battlefield. A man must be assimilated in thought and purpose and affection to all the movements of the Divine Spirit before he can rank with those who are fitted for these upraising and restoring ministries.

For to recover is in reality the work of the Divine Spirit Himself, and the Spirit seeks a spiritual man to be the instrument of it. No other qualification will avail for the great enterprise. In dealing with the recrudescence of evil in a believing soul, the wisdom that comes down

from above and the power to interpret aright the mind of Jesus Christ are essential. A man may have Shakespeare's wide insight into all samples of human nature, united to the instinctive art of a first-class diplomatist, but he will still fall deplorably below the exacting level of his work unless gifts from on high are joined to his natural qualifications. He must have that fresh discernment, that new knowledge, that elastic capacity of practical adaptation, that holy tactfulness with which the Divine Spirit enriches the nature of the man who is open to His leadings. We need an unction of the Holy One to know human nature as well as the mysteries of redemption. If we have any care for backsliders from the faith, if our feeling towards them rises higher than that of undisguised resentment for the wrong they have done, if we would fulfil the Christlike duty of bearing one another's burdens and making our own the common responsibilities of the Church, we must cultivate this fitness. The recovery of others is a motive to spirituality, and we shall be confirmed in the rarest attainments of the religious life by the work for which we fit ourselves. The Church is unspiritual where this work is undone or pursued with but indifferent success.

Moreover, strong motives are necessary to sustain a man in the task of recovering the fallen

to their lost purity of faith and life, and such motives are only found amongst those who are deeply spiritual. These perceive what a tragedy it is for a man to lose his place in the spiritual order and to disappear from the providential sphere where such possibilities were within his reach. Some defections, when measured by the expediencies of the social order, may seem comparatively trivial and scarcely call for serious treatment designed to counteract them; whilst other defections may so discredit the community of Christians before the world that they excite resentment rather than pity in those upon whom the burden of dishonour falls. But such resentments always retard the work of recovery, and may possibly suggest a treatment which turns the temporary lapse into an incurable evil. When the offence of a transgressing disciple is looked at from the spiritual standpoint, and the tragedy is measured in spiritual ways, the motives which impel in the work of bringing him back to rightness before God will not be easily thwarted.

Meekness is allied to spirituality, and there can be no effectual ministry to those who are estranged where there is a temper of wrath, pride, and spiritual superciliousness. The task must be begun, continued, and ended in the spirit of lowliness. Such reproaches as the founder of the

Jewish State, for once only, hurled at the people of his charge when the spirit of meekness failed him will bring back no wanderer. The spiritual man is always humble, for he has learned his dependence on those inspirations which come down from God. He does not boast of any grace with which he has been enriched, as though he had not received it. He knows more perfectly than those living on inferior levels of experience how when the reign of pure goodness dawns within the soul the human is abased and the Divine alone is exalted. Indeed, it is his own sense of nothingness which enables him to receive the subtle influences by which he is transformed and spiritualised. "Considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." An unspiritual temper has always more or less of egoism and partisanship in it, and self-idolatry is the worst of all idolatries. If there is the least suspicion of that in our attitude of mind, if we speak to those who have backslidden as if we were giants speaking down to pigmies of another race, if we talk from the far-off heights of a sanctity to which we ourselves have fought our valiant way, we shall do mischief rather than good, and that upon a lamentably enormous scale. We had better leave those overtaken in fault severely alone. We must avoid supercilious assumption. The idea must never

be hinted that the sin into which they have fallen is abnormal, and that we have some kind of insurance against it which makes us into a separate caste.

Off the west coast of Africa there is an island colony, a nest of fever, the governor of which lives on the summit of a salubrious mountain and telephones his administrative orders to subordinates who dwell in the belt of miasma at the foot. The colony is not happily administered. Do not let us talk down from the heights even to the faithless and unworthy. Like the Lord Himself, we need to make ourselves one with those whom we would restore and uplift. The same temptation may befall us and find out in us the same frailties. How should we wish to be dealt with if in the same unhappy circumstances? We need to be altruistic in method as well as in motive. The Lord knew human nature well when He appointed a recovered backslider to be the strengthener of weak brethren and the special messenger to an apostate nation.

The highest spirituality is altruistic, for its genius constrains it to sympathy with those who fall and a tireless endeavour to lift them up. That Church is not the most Christlike which is careful of its reputation and has an immaculate record, but the Church which risks even its own

name in stretching out hands to the weak, and within which the spiritual find time and faculties absorbed in bringing back those who have gone astray. We shall have to share the reproach of the backslider if we are to help him into the old paths and recover him from his shame. The law of Christ, which is the only secret of success in this task, consists in taking upon ourselves the burdens of those who disappoint their early hopes. Those who bear others' burdens are not inclined to gossip about the delinquencies of those they seek to help. We are discreetly reserved about the shortcomings of our own kith and kin, and if the tie of spiritual counted for as much as that of natural brotherhood, there would be less gloating over the failures of those who fail to honour the name they bear. We sometimes think spirituality is an attribute which links a man with the heavenlies, and commands homage and admiration akin to the worship extended to those who have been canonised. The genius of spirituality is practical. The function of the man who is possessed by the Divine Spirit and inspired with the Divine breath is to restore those who have been overtaken in offence and transgression.

XII

THE PRIMEVAL SOUL-SLAYER

"He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth."—JOHN viii. 44.

THESE words occur in our Lord's discourse with the Jews. He charges them with seeking to compass His death, and asserts that in so doing they prove their affiliation with the Evil One, who is the arch-homicide of the ages. Their lack of candour, moreover, can be traced back to the common temper they share with him who stood not in the truth, but is a liar and the parent of it.

Every fact lends itself sooner or later to abuse and exaggeration. The Scripture statement that evil begins outside human life and precedes our personal transgression is regarded by some people as freeing them from personal accountability for their misdoings; and, on the other hand, the doctrine of man's freedom to choose either good or evil betrays some of us into the notion that good will always obey our beck and call, and

that evil need not be inordinately dreaded, because it must always continue within the personal control of the man who commits it, and can never exceed the regulating power of the will in which it is cradled. Both assumptions are charged with peril.

The good and the evil in us are not spontaneous and self-originated. Evil as well as good has a mysterious genesis and far-off paternity; so at least our Lord implied in this conversation with the Jews. There was subtle seed of the devil in them which determined their attitude towards Christ and His message. They were the infatuated instruments of one who was working by the methods of falsehood towards the red goal of murder. His diabolic aim was the sacred life of the very Son of God. In destroying Jesus he thought to destroy all the value and blessedness of life.

And this was consistent with the few lurid glimpses given of his past character and history. From the beginning he had sought to despoil men of the gift of life, and as his favoured method had baited for his victims with error, prevarication, downright falsehood.

It is well to remember that every temptation to sin is based upon falsehood, and that the end it seeks is death. "He that committeth sin is

of the devil," and in the act of sinning he becomes at once the arch-homicide's instrument and victim. It is not by our own initiative only that we sin. Men sometimes look upon wrong-doing as a private adventure of their own whose issues they may control, a detached enterprise that does not confederate them with the powers of evil which are at work in the universe. But sin always establishes an organic relation with the Evil One, and that organic relation is pregnant with sinister and inevitable consequences. The man who commits it fools himself with falsehood and abets the work of death in himself and others. From the beginning the devil has always proved himself a liar, and the father of it, and the consummate slayer of the soul.

Our Lord's words bring us face to face with the fact that it is to the primeval enemy of life we give heed whenever we listen to the inward whispers which lead us into lawlessness and transgression. The aim towards which the great prince of temptation has been setting himself from the days of his dethronement and apostasy is that of soul-murder. The startling assertion is illustrated in the glimpse we get of his tragic work. Whatever the human traditions which enter into the story of the Fall, the allegory is close to the facts of experience, and interprets antecedent mysteries which lie outside

the direct ethical consciousness. It may sound like a libel on the fallen archangel of Milton, whom the great poet has painted in colours not altogether unsublime; but he is one who takes a gratuitous delight in the havoc of death, for the pure blessedness of being has become an offence to his distorted instincts. To bring our first parents under the sentence God had levelled against disobedience, and make them destroy themselves, was the aim pursued by the temptation in the garden. Cain was not the first homicide. The mischief began in the sphere of the unseen, and the violence of the man who slew his brother had been fostered by the same malign power which robbed innocence of its first Eden. The envy, the malice, and the obscured sense of the sacredness of life which brought the first foul human blood-stain upon this earth were results that had been calculated and deliberately brought to pass. It is for this he has never ceased to provoke feud and violence in the midst of the nations. Kings and statesmen sometimes flatter themselves that they have been drawing the sword to vindicate their country's honour or defend its homes, but more often than not they have been the tools of a superhuman will they did not perceive and have been ministering to the desires and perverted appetites of an unseen adversary of the race. It was the act of this sinister

agency to blind the Jews to the glory of Christ's person and the authority of His claim, so that in destroying Him they might destroy the very fountain of life. And it is the same dreadful end which he pursues in all the chicaneries and machinations of the sinning and troubled centuries. He is consumed by a thirst insatiable as that of Dives. The tendency of sin is towards death, and all the weight of this apostate spirit's influence and untiring energy is to lead men into death by seducing them into sin.

We may verify the temper ascribed to the fallen angel by a study of the nature and tendency of sin as it unfolds itself upon the stage of our earthly life. The final outcome of every form of transgression is the abridgment and destruction of all high attributes of body and soul, and this many-sided murder is only prevented from working itself out by the restraints of human law, by early training, by considerations of prudence, and above all by the power of religion. Every passion set on fire from beneath would end thus but for the timely check imposed upon its riot and wantonness. We look upon the crime of murder as something abnormal, and assume the man who perpetrates it must have a peculiar face and an abnormal head. We study him with fearful interest and morbid curiosity. Murder is simply

matured sin, and the bias to sin is in every one of us. A murderer is a man who is more audaciously logical and pertinacious than an average transgressor, following out to their necessary conclusions the premises laid down in envy, lust, hatred, avarice. He is not the nervous, hesitating man of half-measures. Sin is the negation of love, and as such is adverse to life in all the forms under which God bestows it. Sin is the lust of power, and the fullest sense of power comes to a man when he plays with human life. He then feels himself a god. Many a savage, nay, many a tyrant installed in lands boasting of literatures and civilisations, has chopped off heads without scruple simply to assert his power, and some of the slum murders to-day are outbreaks of despotic temper and nothing more. Sin is envy, and unrestrained envy always longs for the disappearance of a rival. It is restless to despoil. Sin is greed, and greed always desires the removal of those in possession, or would strip them of what they have till they are impoverished to extinction. Red rubber and low-flash oil exemplify a horrible fact—the interests of a trade put before human life. Sin is sensuality, and baffled or glutted lust changes into loathing and unpitying revenge. Sin is conflict with the great and holy Giver of life, and if unstopped goes on to smite and to slay to

assert its disagreement with God. The gladness of life irritates discordant and malevolent natures. The singing of a bird provokes. Laughter mocks their misery and must be stifled. Such is the genius of sin as unfolded before our daily eyes. Is it then incredible that the arch-sinner of the ages is a murderer gloating over ruin, plotting against the blessedness of those whom God has created, and depriving them of the gifts that make life to be desired?

And in tenfold stronger degree he is the enemy of the life that is life indeed, life in God, life made ready to open out before the Divine Presence in heaven. He sets himself to despoil the new and better Edens God is planting in the wilderness of human souls even more desperately than he set himself to despoil the old. To the fools who make light of sin it is an extravagance of the preacher to say that every temptation to sin has murder as its covert motive and hidden mainspring, but history is vocal with the witness that the wages of sin is death. Everything that allures from God and alienates from His mind is meant to sever the tie that unites us to His life. In thwarting man's salvation this masked Person from the unseen, who whispers in our hearts and with whose insinuations we coquet in light-hearted fashion, gluts his dreadful passion for devastating life and slaying the soul.

And do not let us suppose that this is true only of the flagrant transgressions to which he tempts men. It is true no less of the spiritual offences to which he allures us with subtle blandishments. It is axiomatic that the minding of the flesh is death. You admit it without a word. But by the minding of the flesh you mean greed, tumultuous appetite, the rage of the fevered blood, the soul-wasting frenzies of revenge. It means more than this. Whenever carnal passion breathes upon the dawning spirituality of human souls, dimming the inward light and strangling the higher pulsation, death begins and the work of the arch-homicide prevails. It is said that volcanoes which have long since ceased to be active give off enough carbonic acid to destroy life. The gases sometimes pour down the rifts and gullies in invisible streams. The mouth of hell may no longer open itself in a man to vomit forth avarice, impurity, drunkenness, violence, and yet subtle and fatal evil may be in him and find its disastrous vent through all the crevices of his daily life.

We are reminded of the methods by which he works. He has lost the faculty for truth, and his chosen method is that of deceit. Indeed, if he is to go in face of man's instinct for self-preservation he is shut up to such ways and means.

There are races upon the earth amongst whom

the lie has become a fine art. It is uttered with suavity, self-satisfaction, a sense of culture and accomplishment. In fact, it is the crown of a liberal education, and the habit brings no loss of self-respect. But the races which have carried this accomplishment to the last pitch of refinement are but blundering imitators of the original type. The first master of falsehood has been found out every day and hour of the long centuries, and yet men are always prepared to believe him afresh. One scarcely knows whether to wonder more at the effrontery of the Evil One or at the boundless credulity of his silly victims. In fact, he possesses the somewhat rare power of making the multitudes of the human race disbelieve their own eyes and ears. He is an equal adept at every branch of the craft, the white lie and hard swearing, prevarication and perjury, fine-spun insinuation and naked treachery.

He told our first parents that by enlarging their experience and trying to see both sides of the much-debated question of good and evil they would rise in the scale of being and emulate the majesty of the Most High. The fact was that in enlarging their experience of forbidden things they sank their natures and began at once to backslide into the brute as fast as their passions would carry them. He asserted that the Divine

threatenings were empty sound, and that after eating the alluring fruit they should possess a life inviolable as that of God. But by the very act of tasting they were rendered mortal, and they received the swift sentence of death within themselves. And from that time to this the history of the race has been filled up with flatteries, false promises, glozing insinuations that have tempted men into the ways of death. With an inexplicable infatuation men still listen to the Evil One as though he were the most veracious being God ever made. He was so confident of his power to persuade that to Jesus Christ Himself he suggested doubts of the inward and outward witness which testified to the Divine Sonship, thinking that if the doubt could only be used to goad Him into a selfish miracle His mission would be at an end and His power would perish. He assured Him that the angels who had attended Him to Bethlehem, and who should one day welcome Him in His triumphal ascension, would bear Him up in their hands if He would only cast Himself from the temple tower. But the Christ would have been crushed and broken, and the world would have heard of Him only as a misguided fanatic. He promised to the Son of Man the kingdoms of this world if He would only bow the knee, but the dominion would have been transient as the mirage. He prompted Caiaphas to

say that the death of this man would save the nation, but whilst it redeemed the world it left the nation to perish.

The falsehoods of the first deceiver are many, but they may perhaps all be grouped under two heads—the falsehoods of flattery and the falsehoods of depreciation. He seeks to invert the relation between good and evil, and all current confusions are the triumph of his craft. He casts over the present a misleading glamour, and presents the future as an unsubstantial dream. He never wearies in his task of trying to make men into practical materialists.

He flatters the senses and exaggerates the possibilities of good with which their channels are charged. It is a wonderful thing to be rich, mighty, famous, irresistible, to have every desire gratified, to drain every cup of pleasure that is presented to the lips. The world is a very grand place indeed for a young man or woman to exploit, and one must be hard to please if he needs anything better. Vanity Fair is the place where the lines fall in pleasant places, and it is made light of only by half-crazy Puritans. It is only human to visit the pageant and revel in its whirl of excitement. In the dram, the hand at bridge, the racecourse, there is little to be feared if a man is watchful and does not unduly tempt

the fates. All such things may be enjoyed to advantage and without risk of grave moral harm. The first duty of man is to make the best of the pleasures in the midst of which he finds himself. The speciousness of such pleas has been proved again and again. False views of the world will prevail whilst the ear bends itself to such suggestions and the direct influence of Jesus Christ is set at nought. It will be looked upon as a counsellor beaming with bonhomie rather than as a sinister enchantress.

The deer in our parks lose the quick power of scent once possessed by their kind, and deer-stealers manage to approach them by carrying bundles of sweet hay on their heads. Men are not always quick to detect the dangers which assail their character and destiny, and the primitive murderer can get very near to us if he comes with the things that steep the senses in satisfaction, pleasant odours, wonderful enchantments. He tricks out the tainted pleasures of the world till they taste ambrosial.

And then he works by depreciation of the spiritual as well as by the hollow and illusive eulogy of that which is of the earth earthy. As the great sophist of the ages speaks to us, spiritual realities clothe themselves with a dissolving haze so that we can scarcely discern the substance

which is beneath them. Does myth or solid history preponderate in the picture of Jesus Christ which has been handed down to us? Perhaps eternity itself may have no serious significance for us. The Man of Sorrows comes, moreover, to haunt us out of our pleasures with His painful romance of thorn-crowned pallor and woe. His claim is a matter of argument, legitimate argument of course, after the researches and controversies of eighteen centuries. He may be superhuman, but we still wait for His complete credentials. Many highly rational thinkers have not quite made up their minds what to think concerning one side of the personality of Jesus. If honest and virtuous men do not accept Him for more than an unusually perfect type of His race, why should He sway a spiritual sceptre over us? The personality of Jesus is singularly unblemished and soul-moving, but it is difficult to see at this distance the sign of the Father upon His brow, and He may or may not win His way to universal faith. We are not in the realm of pure mathematics, and dogmatic, clean-cut, definitions do not suit the subject with which we grapple. Such are the doubts and suggestions which arise within us in this modern atmosphere. My brethren, in all our reasonings let us not forget that we are face to face with insidious and diabolic forces of false-

hood. These mists which sometimes seem to wreathe the form of the Son of God and render it vague, nebulous, undefined, are the mists which an unseen tempter is breathing forth about our pathway. Of course we cannot answer all questions by reminding ourselves of this fact, but we can guard against the perils of the atmosphere which invests us. Religious controversy is not a question of pure logic. Temptation with a counteractive spiritual leading may be factors which sway the soul. A spirit of truth and a spirit of deceit are contending within us.

It is all important for us to discriminate between the two conflicting voices which speak within us. Unless the man on 'Change can discriminate between the rumours which reach his ear he may be ruined in an hour and his children beggared. And to do this in the sphere of conduct is yet more important. The only guarantee we can have against being victimised by the lies of the tempter is the power of spiritual judgment. We cannot always save ourselves from corruption and death by obeying sets of rules which our predecessors have formulated. The signposts on the highways by which we pass may sometimes be put up the wrong way. The spheres of secular culture may be permeated by the death-dealing lies of the Evil One. We can only escape illusion, falsehood, fatality, by listening

to the voice of Jesus. Unless He who is the truth is with us and in us we shall be captivated by fictions and inveigled towards the habitation of death.

When Mungo Park and his companions were making their last fatal voyage down one of the unexplored tributaries of the Niger, the boat in which they were travelling was suddenly gripped between two sunken rocks as in a vice, and their savage foes rushed upon them from the banks and put them to death. And are not some of us in the grip of falsehood which holds us prisoners till death swoops down? What is the lie that holds your soul in its jaws? Perhaps that the senses contain the secret of happiness and that you must make it your first aim to get all you can out of the world. Perhaps it is that a life of devotion to the will of Jesus is not the noblest and most satisfying lot possible to a man upon earth. Perhaps it is that the difference between a man who trusts Jesus Christ and seeks to be one of His disciples and the man who does not is trivial. Perhaps it is that Christ's claims are a subject-matter for debate rather than for believing submission. Perhaps it is that the Bible is not a sufficient guide to the things of the soul, and that the Atonement is a surviving phase of pagan superstition. Get out of the grip of the falsehood. Death is near, but

life is nearer if you are wise to know and to judge. The liar whispers in your ear, but the true and faithful witness of the Eternal Wisdom may be heard also. Do not repeat the infatuation of the Jews by desiring a murderer to be granted unto you.

XIII

RELIGION AND INTELLIGENCE

"When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side."—MATT. xiii. 19.

MEN sometimes speak as though Christ accomplished His work of salvation in human souls without awakening into vigorous exercise thought, reason, intelligence. Now does Christ sanction any such idea as this? Does He teach that men and women may be saved whilst their minds are still asleep? Does He not rather teach that intelligence is the very first step in the process of salvation?

In the parable before us three causes of failure are specified. The first type of man — the character represented by the wayside hearer — is stolid, impassive, animal, the man of whom we should probably say, with an over-indulgent charity, that he has no gleam of capacity for religion. He is the man who has no interest in Christianity. It seems to pass him by altogether. And of all

three classes the man who does not and will not understand is the most hopeless of all. The lack of saving intelligence which he shows is not, let it be understood, constitutional. The gospel can never be so wanting in just reasonableness as to demand intelligence from the man who is incapable of it. There is an imbecility, however, which is not the misfortune of congenital defect, but of sloth, of neglect, of preoccupation with gross and ignoble aims. It is this moral imbecility which is the cause of failure in hearers of the first category. "Some fell by the wayside."

The soil of the wayside was of the same essential character as the soil in the richest sections of the field. It was not originally wanting in fertility. Nature had been quite impartial. It was rich as the soil that gave most lavishly to the sickle, but it had yielded itself up to the indurating tramp of the passers-by. The intelligence that saves, and the lack of which is the omen of coming barrenness and woe, is the intelligence that comes not from natural aptitude or education or culture, but from conscientious attention — the art and habit of taking pains in the things of God, that spirit of deep and intense earnestness which starts into brisk movement all the faculties of the soul, just as a fresh breeze on the river will start into movement every craft that can hoist a sail as

well as the slim and shapely yacht. I sometimes meet with men naturally sharp and active in mental movement; but they save up their quickness for business or politics or recreation. Their minds are just about as slow in getting round religious subjects as a caterpillar would be that had set itself the task of creeping round the parish church. And on the other hand, I meet with men who are not naturally bright and active and intellectual, but their minds are always in a glorious ferment on religious problems. The difference is one of character. Those who do not understand the word, and in whom the gospel miscarries, are not always or indeed generally wanting in gifts or opportunities or mental training. They are the people who lack that interest which is the spring of all true illumination.

The truth that comes to the unreceptive mind will not lie untouched for long. Did you ever know a well-cultivated country in which there were not flocks of birds ready to drop like a pattering shower upon the handful of grain that may have been spilt by the wayside? The cunning creatures might know just how many grains of wheat will trickle out of the trailing ear as the harvest wagon creeps slowly through the wooded lanes; they might have counted the holes in the sacks through which the grain leaks

as the farmer carts his corn to the mill, and how much of the seed the harrow will fail to cover up as it is driven across the furrow; for there is a deft bill for almost every grain. If the grain is not hidden from view, these clouds of watchers on the wing will find it out before many minutes are over. There are some subjects to which we pay little attention and then lay aside for years, and we find, when we want to take them up again, that a great deal of what we heard or read in the past comes ready to hand. But it is not so with religious subjects. There are hostile agencies encamped round about us on every side ready to snatch away these truths from our apprehension. The devil has rapacious hordes hungry to do his work within constant call. The seed will not lie upon the mere surface of the mind for ages as safe as the wheat in Egyptian tombs and then sprout in the far-off future. If there has been no deep appreciation of the truth, the very memory of it will in many instances pass away. Nature does no harrowing for us; but the truth that has entered into our reason and into our heart is truth of which we can never be robbed by our spiritual adversary. Its growth and expansion and full fruitfulness may be thwarted in various ways, but this at least we may claim—it can never be taken from us. The truth has no hold at all upon a man till it is understood. In mature life

the child retains only those parts of its education that were distinct from cram—the parts of which it had an intelligible grasp. When we once understand a subject it becomes a part of us. We can never be robbed of it unless by a very unusual accident. It is easy to rob a dead man, and the devil finds his very easiest task to be that of robbing the dead intellect of the truth that is just touching it. If you do not understand, the devil can do just about what he likes with you. But he can never completely strip you of that which has entered into your understanding and your heart.

But some one may say, "This is making religion a thing of the intellect rather than of the heart and life." I reply, religion takes in every part of the nature that God has given to a man, and an unthinking religion is as absurd and mischievous a piece of pretence as a pilot's certificate in the hands of a blind man. If you had steamer shares, you would protest against the madness of such a man stepping on to the bridge and giving the orders intended to bring the steamer into dock. You might just as well try to walk down the footway of a railway line with your eyes blindfolded and your hands tied to your side as try to practise a religion into the very essence of which intelligence does not enter. You may have intelligence without religion, but you can never have very much of true religion

without intelligence. By intelligence I do not mean bookishness, but the constant occupation of the thought with the questions religion suggests to it. You can no more get to heaven without clear thinking than you can get there without sweet and wholesome conduct. Do not imagine heaven is a sort of etherialised clover-field into which any brainless quadruped can be turned to graze —so long, at least, as it is free from the ferociousness of the wild beast. Thought, will, affection, behaviour are like the wheels of a vehicle moved by one common power; and if thought is sluggish, will must be frail, affection cold, and behaviour lax. You cannot separate the intelligence from the other parts of the complex mechanism. Whilst the mind is slow to occupy itself with Divine things, you cannot have a fervent soul and a pure life. In fact, intelligence is the driving-wheel of the whole mechanism, and if this stops religion stops. The first condition in the evangelisation of a human soul is that, in some degree at least, the gospel shall be understood. The restless, ever-coursing sap in the tree is just as necessary in the economy of its life as leaf and blossom. There can be no fruit without it. A tree filled with frozen sap could never give any sign of life. The sap must be set free by the warm sun and started into vitalising movement. There can be no life in

a soul whilst the channels of thought are frozen. Unless thought is stirred, and that constantly, there will be no practical goodness in the life. Or it is perhaps better to put it in this way. As a matter of fact, thought never does stop. From the first moment of consciousness in the morning to the last of consciousness at night the stream of thought is never broken off. It is as unceasing as the pulsation of the blood through the veins. If you are not thinking about the problems of religion you will be thinking about something else which is nearer to your unregenerate heart. Religion can never become a vitalising power in you till it fills the supreme place in your thought.

What are the causes that make against a quick apprehension of religious teaching? How is intellectual torpor produced? How comes it to pass that the soul which ought to be so rich and fruitful should be trampled into incapacity and deadness?

The world sends the great steam-roller of its toils and cares and burdens across the mind, and under the terrible impact the mind grows hard and dull and unfit for all the finer processes of thought and contemplation. You might almost as well try to dibble seed into your granite pavement as try to get a high spiritual thought into minds that

have been indurated by the pressure of these gross temporal wants and interests. Not only does worldliness thwart the fruition of the seed when it is half grown, it likewise prevents the first entrance of the seed into the mind. The crowds who followed Christ for the mere pickings of His miracles were of this type. They belonged to the wayside hearers. They wanted as their Messiah a political reformer who should destroy the castle government by aliens in Jerusalem, give them a loaf as cheap as manna, and fields and vineyards without mortgages that would plough and dress themselves. Poor things! I dare say they had been driven into shiftlessness, improvidence, lazy stupor, by grinding despotisms; but there they were, unfitted by the sordidness of their daily life to hear and understand the gospel. The mind was so hardened by the other cares that were perpetually pressing upon it that they had lost for the time all capacity to consider the truth.

And the same cause is at work in different forms to-day. Men and women not infrequently make it manifest that they have been landed into a life of respectable animalism. There may be no outward and flagrant excess, but the physical nature and its needs have come to preponderate, and the mind has lost all its softness and susceptibility and spiritual responsiveness. In some cases these subtler interests are shut out by the wild revolu-

tionary dreams to which they have been goaded. Not infrequently the long hours and the slavish drudgery and the degrading occupations that have grown up in our modern life rob the mind of its power of appreciating the sublime appeals of the gospel. We free-tea and soup-kitchen people into our mission rooms, and then we find that they have no spiritual receptivity. And in many instances they are not likely to have it whilst want is so near at hand, and the form of toil degrades, and the anxieties of the world are so supremely oppressive. And there are men less to be pitied, who make themselves slaves with blunted sensibilities through the excessive fierceness of commercial struggle. The soft, tender surface of the mind is destroyed in an equally disastrous fashion. They tell us that they have been thinking so much in the week that they do not want to be made to think on Sunday. They desire rather a gospel warranted to save without making any draft upon the study and intelligent co-operation of the man who is to be saved by it. They wish to be soaked in a vapour bath of sentimental orthodoxy. They resent being summoned out of themselves. They do not want to give thought, energy, close meditation to the hearing of the Word. Well, minds of this type, that have lost their spring-like freshness and penetrability through the pressure of

business, are just as unfitted to receive the seed as minds that are altogether sordid. Some of you are very hard on death-bed repentances. Of course you would never offer to God the dregs of your life. But perhaps you are enacting the meanness of a death-bed repentance every week, for fifty-two Sundays in the year you offer to God the dregs of your thought after the world has taken six days' freshness and bloom and vitality out of it. Without mental effort you cannot truly receive the gospel. You will be a wayside hearer to the end unless you can escape the influence of your daily round of toils and cares.

In some cases the mind has become hard and unreceptive in religious things because all power of thought has been absorbed by pleasure and its claims. Not a few people who would measure the regulation height have never outgrown the insipidity and vacuousness of childhood. Their minds are magnetised by trifles too insignificant to be mentioned here, and it is almost impossible to get the judgment to act on religious questions. They look upon life as a grand frolic rather than as a stern discipline by which we must be fitted for loftier destiny and associations. I do not wish to speak of recreations in a strain of sour Puritanism. With the ever-increasing tension of business competition, with the confinement

and monotony inseparable from a great many of the avocations of modern life, with the fierce ordeal to which health is sometimes subjected, recreation becomes a sacred and imperative necessity. To take physical exercise may be just as much a duty as to read your Bibles and say your prayers. But beware of excess in these things. You may become animalised by intemperate athletics, and unfitted for fine religious perception. After the life has been running for weeks in channels of muscular activity, it needs a great wrench to get it back into the higher grooves of thought and sympathy. If the first thing to which you turn on opening your newspaper is the sporting column, if you can carry in your mind the great cricket scores of a season, if golf and tennis tournaments stir your pulses as nothing else, it is time you were looking deeply into the fealty of your soul to God. You won't have much time or capacity for religion if you can afford to lavish upon mere sports the greater half of your mental life. When the mind is waltzed over in your dreams by troops of gay dancers, when triumphal processions of batsmen, oarsmen, tennis players, and footballers are unceasingly trooping through your imagination, no wonder the mind becomes hardened and unable to take in the seed of the kingdom.

And then in Christ's time the march of the sanctimonious sciolist, the parade of official knowledge and monopoly, had trampled all the receptivity out of not a few natures. That it was the duty of the scribe only to know, and of the common people not so much to understand as to obey, was an opinion that had long been industriously fostered and was fast becoming universal. The rank and file of the people were to be saved by the round of ritual; and the round of ritual very often took all the edge from the understanding. Popular thinking on religious questions had almost died out. Religion was to be taken, as we take our doctors' medicine to-day, by prescription; and the effect of the medicine would be just the same whether the patient could read the prescription and knew the ingredients of the medicine or not. And then at last the scribes turned round and cursed the people for that very lack of independent religious thought which they had assured them was virtue and salvation. "The people which knoweth not the law is accursed." No wonder that under a régime of this sort the mind had lost much of its spiritual receptiveness.

And the same tendency shows itself in our day. We have vicarious sacerdotalism in religious function, and we have also vicarious pedagogy in

theological thought and research. The tramp of the procession, the round of ritual observance, the endless religious function and formalism, have destroyed the aptitude for religious ideas once possessed by some minds. And this relegation of religious research to others suits the languid, ease-loving temper of the day. The doctrine that a very excellent kind of religion may be associated with dense ignorance and stupor is perilously popular nowadays. We imagine it is enough for the few to think. We can leave Christian evidence and Christian doctrine to a noble host of professors. We do not want theological preaching. Doctrinal technicalities may well be left to the men of the cloister. Our scribes may be indefinitely worthier than the scribes who were Christ's contemporaries, but by trusting in them we destroy our power of intellectual response to the gospel. It is just as sound to let priests do your praying as theologians your thinking. We are like those Mohammedans in Cairo who lay themselves down for the Mecca pilgrims to march over them. We suffer the great and noble company of scholars to ride over our heads and destroy or impair our personal power of receiving the truth. By our languid reverence for the scribe, our indifference to the high privilege of religious thought, our oblivion of

the fact that responsibility is direct to God, we make ourselves into wayside hearers through whose natures the fulness of the truth cannot flow. It will not do for the hardened soil to say to itself, "If I yield myself to the foot of the careless passer-by, and lose my opportunity of receiving seed, it is no great matter. The next square yard may be fertile." Ah, but there is no vicarious harvest! However much your favourite guides may understand, if you yourself fail to grasp it the Evil One will snatch away the magnificent possibility of the harvest. There will be no fruitfulness in you upon which the Lord of the harvest can smile.

Fence your natures against these hardening influences that will make you incapable of receiving religious ideas. You can make the character of the soil into which the gospel seed shall fall. The preacher cannot possibly do that. "Take heed how ye hear."

Some years ago one of the royal tombs in upper Egypt was opened. The form in that tomb had been placed there more than four thousand years ago, and in the sand of the floor there were the print of the feet of the men who had placed the stone upon the sarcophagus and had then closed the outside entrance. Four thousand, yea, four tens of thousands of years

hence, the imprint of this ministry will be round about you in your eternal resting-place. See to it that the feet of the messengers of the gospel of peace are only beautiful, and that the ministry that is about you never becomes through your neglect a ministry of condemnation. "Take heed how ye hear."

XIV

INCOMPLETE CONVERSIONS

"But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it: yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended."—MATT. xiii. 20, 21.

IN the Revised Version of the New Testament the phrase "stony places" is changed to "rocky places." The alteration helps us to a clear understanding of this portion of the parable. The idea conveyed by the older form of the translation is that pebbles and boulders were mixed up in the soil of the field, just as currants and raisins might be mixed up with the ingredients of a cake or pudding. However unfavourable the presence of a great number of stones in the soil might be to the perfect health of the crops, they could scarcely have the fatal results here described. The expression "rocky places" at once suggests an intelligible interpretation of this section of the parable. Underneath a thin sprinkling of surface mould, quite inadequate to support vegetable life,

there was a continuous layer of rock. The grains of wheat when sown could get on very well for a time. There was sufficient moisture in the soil and heat in the air to start them in the first steps of growth. At first the soil bids fair to respond to the demand made upon it. The green blade presents itself and makes uncommonly rapid advances. Indeed there is something rather suspicious about the lavish and premature germination. You must look just a little below the surface to understand why it is so. Under that thin sprinkling of mould there is the bare, harsh, impenetrable rock. Indeed here and there the mould scarcely suffices to hide the rock. Here, then, you have top-heavy wheat plants that are all but rootless. There is a big framework to maintain and a frail network through which to supply the necessary nutriment. The avenues through which life is kept up are few and beggarly and half closed. A crisis has been reached: without a free supply of moisture there can be no further multiplication of cells above or below ground.

And at this juncture there comes a great testing-time. The balminess of the early spring has gone. Perhaps if that had lasted the whole year through there might have been some pretence of growth for months still. But the sun waxes hot with tropical fervour. Possibly dry winds from the

desert begin to blow at the same time. The other wheat plants that seemed so far behind at first profit rather than otherwise by the change. But the prematurely developed plants wither away. They have reached the limit of their growth, and now blasting comes. The section of the field that was so lush and rank and green at first will never brighten into gold or be pressed by the foot of singing reapers. The vertical rays always prove themselves a destruction that wasteth at noon-day where there is no deepness of earth and no development of root. The crisis of the waxing summer has proved that there was rock underneath the soil, and the seed, however good in itself, could not develop the root necessary to successful growth.

Wherever the reception of the gospel is imperfect and one-sided, a great testing-time is sure to come. Religious weakness will always be betrayed by some fore-appointed opposition. The first growths of spring are sure to encounter fierce heats that will make the deep root indispensable. The very sensitiveness, the skin-deep sentimentality, the semi-spiritual romanticisms that make some people respond at once to the message of the gospel, will expose them more or less to the force of the antagonisms they will one day encounter in the world. It is a great mercy that persecution,

be it disguised or frankly brutal, does make us know our own failures and limitations before the last harvest comes. The defectively rooted seed could bear no fruit if no fierce heat of persecution or tribulation came to wither it.

There are subtle oppositions that try our religious depth and endurance still. Sometimes the minister finds a withdrawal from Church fellowship because the drunken and unbelieving husband objects to his poor wife trying to be better than himself. Possibly loyalty to Christ has not altogether gone, but one can scarcely help feeling that in some cases there would have been persevering grace if there had been a deeper root. In some instances where the gospel begins to work in a mind, its fullest activity is checked for the time by the discouragements encountered at the hands of unsympathetic brothers and sisters. There are shops where the quiet and silent protest against drunkenness implied in the fourth of a square inch of blue ribbon is not allowed. Of course the proprietors lay it upon the customers. "Some of these might withdraw their patronage." There is the quiet but unmistakable scorn of companions directed against all forms of religious life and earnestness. Sometimes the quiet persecution is not directly waged against religion, but waged for the purpose of harrying young people into associations and amuse-

ments that are hostile to spirituality. Sometimes the force of prestige, fashion, patronage, is quietly directed against the free development of the religious life. Go to church by all means; but for Heaven's sake do not be downright godly! The delicately nurtured creatures of our modern life are sometimes just as sensitive to these things as the early Christians to the spoiling of their goods. We need the deep root still, a religion without reservations, natures responsive in all their affections and faculties to the gospel. Otherwise we cannot endure to the end.

What types of character are represented by rocky-ground hearers? Where does the defect start that issues in rootlessness? Human nature has within itself many veins and layers and beds of thought and sensibility and principle, all of which must be drawn upon by the gospel if it is to bring forth fruit unto perfection. The gospel launches itself into human life upon the supposition that it shall touch every part of man's nature. How are these various veins and layers and beds isolated from each other and rendered inaccessible to the inworking potency of the gospel? What is the rock that separates the deep from the superficial in the man when he becomes a hearer of the word?

In some cases the rock is unthinking selfish-

ness. There are hidden possibilities of love, gratitude, self-abnegation in the character from which the gospel seems to be able to draw forth no single element to itself. The man jauntily starts out from the assumption that the reception of the gospel will bring exemption from all pain, trial, sacrifice, and make life a perpetual May-time. His ready sensibilities fasten upon the roseate surface bloom and promise of the Evangel, and fortify themselves against the forecasts of coming tribulation and the demand for brave and unflinching confession. In this way reason, deliberation, judgment, preparedness for the demands of the future are shut out and forgotten. Such men claim that life ought to be pleasant, and one of the first impressions that comes to them when they hear one side of the gospel is that Christ has come to minister to the gladness and jubilation of human destiny. That is true enough in its way, but not from their standpoint of interpretation. They seem to think that the gospel is a perpetual honey-eating. Like Samson on his journey to Timnath, they want their two hands to be filled with honeycomb as they pass from stage to stage of life. They are people who fasten only on the promise of godliness, and forget its ethic. They are so intoxicated by the idea of receiving that they ignore the service they have to render and

the difficult conditions under which that service must often be prosecuted.

And this rock of unthinking selfishness generally lies in close juxtaposition to another evil strata—the rock of self-complacent imperturbability. When the heart has been utterly broken because of sin, men no longer start back at the thought of pain and tribulation. They do not wish to have a life projected upon lines that are too soft and luxurious. If only they can escape the terrors of God and be taken home to His soul of tenderness at last, they are quite willing to be hated and hunted and outlawed of men. In the days succeeding his conversion Paul never started back from pain and loss and tribulation, for the simple reason that his heart had been utterly broken before God, and in that mood he did not wish to stipulate with Divine Providence for an easy life. His glorious sacrificial heroism blossomed out of the heart that was so utterly broken at Damascus. It promises much for our future when our natures are absolutely soft and contrite. Those who have passed through such a discipline do not claim to be exempt from pain. If the nature is subdued and we sorrow for sin like that, the seed will strike strong and far-reaching root.

What is this rock which separates between the deep and the shallow in human character and

life, and cuts the gospel seed from access to the richest faculties of the soul?

Not infrequently it is formalism of service. The mind is active for a time in the search after spiritual truth, and at last arrest comes. A convert settles into a deadening round of religious automatism, and till some new conversion comes to the soul the essential vitality of the gospel can win no approach to the deepest places of his nature. It is the very genius of some systems to promote formalism. And yet dependence on what is purely external may sometimes be found in the adherents of systems most carefully guarded against rigid ritual and externalism. A man may sometimes maintain unreflective and unspiritual habits of thought, temper, and life in plain evangelical services, Methodist class-meetings, and assemblies in which no one is supposed to speak unless by specific inspiration. We are all in danger of stagnation—reaching a fixed point in religion and never getting beyond it. We satisfy ourselves with the letter rather than with the spirit, with submission to external precept rather than with the spirit of an ever-expanding life. We content ourselves with the past and with the courses of outward religiousness to which its gracious visitations gave rise. It is well for us to review the past and to magnify the grace of God in our con-

version, but I have met with people who live in a conversion that took place forty or fifty years ago as completely as a grub buries itself in an apple. They never put their head outside that one particular fact for a moment. The present is very little to them. They associate no definite aspiration with the future. They do not seek to send the sounding-line day by day into the deep mysteries that concern our individual union with God and our full sanctification to the Divine service. They seem to think that all growth is blind, and forget that the New Testament always associates new growth with new knowledge.

My brethren! we cannot grow to perfection and prove ourselves steadfast in the great crises of life unless we touch all the truths that the Bible has brought within our reach. Times will come when we shall need the help of the deepest truths the gospel can evolve within us. We must let the seed take hold of every power and every faculty. You are not consecrated to God in the fullest sense unless you give up every power of the intellect to His truth. Watch against these latent ossifications that are hostile to the growth of the gospel seed. Let the heavings of a Divine discontent work within you and rend and subdue your heart so that all its elements shall be responsive to the gospel seed.

What is this rock which sunders between the upper and under portions of man's nature?

Sometimes it is the spirit of unhallowed obstinacy. There are hidden reservations in our obedience and service that God only can see. The gospel takes a profound hold of our sentiment and imagination. We cannot resist its charm. But we want to treat it as some Eastern potentate treats the beautiful slave in his harem. He loves her, and is completely captivated by her grace; and yet he wants to hold her as pet and slave at the same time. Our surrender to the gospel very often lacks whole-heartedness. Christianity is exquisite, but it does not always take hold of all the ranges of the moral life. Our religion is a dreamy, spiritual ecstasy, with a lack of stern, steadfast, death-defying principle in it. We admit its charm, and are delighted to obey it up to a certain point; but we want to draw our own line rather than let the author of the gospel draw it for us. Had Peter persisted in drawing the line of forgiveness at seven times rather than at seventy times seven, he would have been a rocky-ground hearer only. There would have been ranges of high spiritual perfection and magnanimity into which the gospel could not have penetrated. The forgiven servant who received his king's grace and was unwilling to show the slightest

fraction of that grace to a fellow-servant was one who received the word into rocky places. O how delighted he was at the thought that the king had forgiven his vast debt! His gratitude doubtless flowered at once into many a grand speech and fair promise. This forgiveness was an unprecedented thing, and would make an epoch in his life. How lovely! How wonderful!—At least, whilst he was the recipient rather than the practical illustrator of this same spirit to another. But the temptation came, it met him on the very threshhold of his new life, and the beautiful blade was withered. There was rock in his heart. Not a few people respond with enthusiasm and ecstasy to the Cross whilst it remains the instrument that cancels the debt. But they turn away from it with chilled hearts and averted glances as soon as it is made the symbol of personal devotion and sacrifice and forgiveness. If the gospel is to unfold itself within us in all its grandeur, there must be the generous, measureless surrender of the whole self to its spirit. We are ready to do much in response to the gospel call, but not everything. There are spheres of affection within us still closed to the spirit of Christ's words. There are things we have made up our minds not to do, at least for the present, perhaps never. Away with these reservations! Let the hammer have clear way to

fall upon the rock! Let the carnal limitations go! Give the gospel seed a chance! Let it bring forth its hundredfold!

The gospel can do nothing for you unless you provide for it suitable conditions. Christianity is not responsible for defects in those who receive it with divided hearts. It will be responsible for defects if they can occur in those who throw open their whole natures to its influence. The seed is perfect. It holds a harvest without a blighted or sickly ear in it. It is not a seed from the attenuated stalks seen in Pharaoh's vision on the banks of the Nile. There is the life of God in the seed. Jesus Christ Himself is the parent grain. In ministering the word He gave Himself. Whatever defect may arise is defect that belongs to the soil and its limitations and to tillers of the soil.

We must look to our own side of this responsibility. God is responsible for the seed; we are responsible for the soil in which it falls. Strenuous, diligent self-culture is necessary to the full and continuous fruitfulness of the gospel. According to an old hyper-Calvinistic theory, God's seed brings with it its own soil and environment. This parable implies another view. The seed may flourish for a time and then utterly fail. Where are our lapsed members? Where are those who did run well? How is it that the premature wither-

ing away out of the fellowship came? Was there not rootlessness? Was there not reservation, unbroken rock in your soul? Give yourself up to the spirit of the gospel. Is not My word a hammer? Bring yourself under the full weight of the word. Never try to get away from its crushing impact. Your whole nature must be pulverised. You must be completely subjugated to the will and authority of God. The heart must be broken into unqualified obedience unless the curse of barrenness is to rest upon you for ever. The curse would not be so terrible if the Divine seed had never come to you.

The rock is not eternal. The conditions of character are not finally fixed. You may have hitherto given a very inadequate and inhospitable reception to the word. But the rock may yet be broken: the reserves dissolved away. The Divine Sower is yet pacing through the fields. The gospel may yet touch you through all the realms of your thought, emotion, life. The summer is not yet ended, nor has the possibility of the hundredfold harvest passed away for ever.

I have sometimes seen the crest of rock rising out of the waving sea of golden grain. It is sown no longer. Once it was covered with its sprinkling of soil. But the soil has been washed to the lower places of the field. It might have been broken,

but now it is barren for ever, fruitless in a little paradise of beauty and fruitfulness. Some of you may be growing hoary in resistance to the gospel and in compromising with its claims. Beware lest you stand out as the type of utter barrenness at last.

XV

THE HIGHER FATHERHOOD

"When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up."—Ps. xxvii. 10.

THIS psalm is David's, but the date of its composition is uncertain. It may have been an outpouring of his youthful exile, when, driven from village to village and from nation to nation, he was compelled at last to place his parents under the protection of the King of Moab. They were too infirm to accompany him in his swift and sudden flights, and to have left them at Bethlehem would have been to tempt a half-mad king to savage rage and revenge. Eastern tyrants see no particular harm in making parents scapegoats for absent sons. To commit them to the care of an alien potentate was perhaps a little more sad even than carrying them out to their long rest in one of the quiet ravines of Bethlehem.

And the separation meant a great deal more to him than it might mean to us. We have outgrown dependence upon our parents by the time we

have reached mid life, and should fear to say anything about it if we had not. But the Oriental has less masculine self-reliance than the hardy Norseman, and is nervous and distrustful of his own initiative. He borrows much of his courage from the backing of one older and presumably better than himself. And, besides, parents fulfil a family priesthood. He has a fear, call it a superstition if you will (it might be well if we had a spice of it), that any step taken without their sanction may be attended with disaster. The parental benediction is quite indispensable. But the expatriation of David's parents meant the loss of their blessing, approval, and support.

Some, however, prefer to connect the composition of the psalm with the event of Absalom's rebellion, and if we accept the later date the language will be that of hyperbole. At that time his parents will probably have been dead for many years. The terms of comparison or contrast are imaginary. David had been forsaken by friends and counsellors. Men he had raised to power had betrayed him. His own son had plotted against his life. His faith in human nature must have undergone an agonising shock. And yet his faith in God is not touched. He would maintain that if things had come to a more desperate pitch even. Should David's desolations exceed

all precedents, could mother come back and disown him in his reverses, could father forget his past pride in his son's candour and courage and be won to the cause of the treacherous Absalom, yet would David still rest in the Lord his God.

It may be instructive to look at the passage from both points of view. The one does not exclude the other, for upon both occasions there were elements of treachery which bring out the contrast of God's unchanging promise and faithfulness.

These words are the words of one who feels the disappointing limitations in the best human help.

This will be the dominant emphasis of the words if the psalm were written in David's youth. Those for whom he yearned were hidden behind the mountain wall, whose purple outlines he could watch from almost every point of his wanderings. The fond old hearts that had sometimes fainted with fear and suspense could not know of the perils through which he was passing. In his desolation he turns to the God of his fathers, the God who put love and graciousness and fond delight into the heart of Jesse and the unnamed mother of his sons. He assures himself Jehovah could make this hunted life of the wilderness as sweet and as calm by

His unseen ministry as a renewed and exalted childhood.

And sooner or later times like these come to us. A portentous gulf opens out between the beginning and the middle of our life. The natural trust of our earlier years vanishes with the dew of youth, and no high spiritual trust comes in to take its place. The ideal home calm has gone from about our pilgrimage. In childhood we may now again have had visitations of distressing and morbid fear; but the wise words that addressed us chased them away. Pain and suffering might befall us now and again, but parental caresses could assuage and remove them, and they were soon forgotten. Parents were behind us in everything, and the life passed in their presence was gay and tuneful as the life of birds. The old world was so tiny and manageable that they could very well be as God Himself there, and rule all things in their providential love. But now the scene has changed, and we have drifted out into unknown cares and pains and fears. Perhaps the loving and benignant ministry of the home has passed beyond the mountain wall of Moab in an unknown land. Father and mother have gone from view, and the gracious rule and counsel and benediction they symbolised belong to the past. Or an in-

evitable gulf has come. We are in new realms, and our sense of the proportion of things has changed. We are in a business conflict that is strange to them, or we are doing business under changed conditions they do not understand. We want some one on whom to lean, and want in vain. And we think there is no longer a wise one above us to smile away our fears, because we have outgrown the wise ones of the past. That is because we do not look high enough. It is not God who is putting upon you this pain and weariness and shadow that tend to make your strained life a curse to you. You have let the human trust die, and you are living in its ghastly and unwholesome tomb with an infatuation as dire as that of the demoniac of Gadara. It is the spirit of the Evil One that has brought you out into the desert. You have not welcomed the Divine trust that waits to supersede the human.

And these words seem to speak of the religious limitation inherent in the ministry that was appointed to guide our childhood and youth. Parents helped us, and that right nobly, in the earlier stages of our growth. They were Church, Creed, Bible to us all in one. We accepted their judgments as final. But we have become analytical. New questions meet us in the world, questions that

had scarcely been formulated when we were children. We have come to the parting of the ways. Parents are perhaps left behind in the quiet sanctuary of an unsophisticated faith. Their children are out in the waste wilderness fighting dark doubts, fleeing from terrifying negations, glad to creep into any crevice of refuge that may be open. Parents could not keep up with us in our march. They answer our questions no longer. It is not a new faith that we want, but a clearer and more scientific expression of the old. We are possessed by religious questions of engrossing interest, and we find little help where we found our noblest help a few years ago. Have we passed into a better school? Has the earthly been superseded by heavenly guardianship and direction? Is there not an empty throne of authority in your heart to which the teaching Spirit should have been welcomed years ago? It is God's purpose to continue in person the early education in sacred things so nobly begun. God has not bereft us of the teaching of father and mother so that He may land us in want. We are the foundlings of the Great Teacher, God, and He takes us up when we are thrust from home by the hand of destiny, just as the Egyptian throne and its sages took up the castaway child on the banks of the Nile. He will never give back His foundling to human care.

He takes the spirit into His own arms. Indeed, the most thoughtful presentation of religion by the most cultivated people must be succeeded by God's unseen gift before an abiding faith can come.

It is well that earthly help and mediation should be withdrawn in due course. It is the ministry of a moment only which is about our early life. God will sustain to us a more generous and satisfying and deathless parentage. He can create about us the atmosphere of light and health and delight that seemed to fill the place in which we were cradled. He is so perfect that He can compensate for the lack of both, giving that which was ministered of the father's strength as well as of the mother's tenderness. Every gift of which we dreamed in the past He can put into the new world He builds about us. If we have faith in God the fading out of the old relationships shall mark a new dawn of love, and the pulling down of the fair home of our infancy shall mark the foundation lines of a mansion that shall enshrine diviner tenderness and fairer sanctities than the past.

These words are the words of one who missed the cheering benediction of him who was the high priest of his family. High priestly splendour and authority seemed to cling to those who, till Christ came, were the world's best priests, priests for

their own children. David had felt the need there was that his judgment should be strengthened and his heart assured by the goodwill of those who were over him by nature. Jacob had felt the same thing in earlier times. He must have his father's blessing before he go on his perilous adventure, even if he steal it. The bereaved Psalmist felt he could live his destined life and do his appointed work if God would shine upon him and bless him as his parents had blessed him in the enterprises of his youth.

Now, if we are sure of God's benediction this will nerve us with courage. Let us go forth to the duties of life with the sunshine of His approval in our hearts. Let us strengthen ourselves day by day in the favour of His countenance. He must give to our lives the sanction, approval, prospering blessing we can no longer hope to win from those of whom we came and who were over us in infancy.

These words express the faith of one who has been betrayed by the uncertainty and capriciousness of human love.

At whatever period we date the psalm it will imply a contrast of this sort. In the earlier period David had been betrayed by the feigned gratitude and affection of Saul, who had accepted him for son-in-law and then hunted him from one end

of the land to the other. At the later period he had been betrayed by Absalom and the very men he had raised to power. And the thought in David's mind seems to be this—Were it possible that father and mother should rise from the dead and forsake their child—were those from whom I received nothing but love in the past, and that in unstinted degree, to join the ranks of my troublers—yet would I keep the high trust of my spirit, and at the point where treachery should be blackest and least expected I would be confident of the fidelity of God and His manifested help.

Unpleasant things do sometimes occur to make us sceptical of human nature. We find men professing piety laying snares for the feet of the just and mining in the darkness. Some of us may have uncommon opportunities of seeing the shortcomings of human nature. And yet we must put a bound to our natural cynicism. Scepticism must never intrude into our thoughts of God. Whatever new shock may come to us, though even heart of father and mother may harden against us, yet we must cling to the high trusts of the Spirit. Religious faith is sometimes apt to suffer through the shocks to which our faith in man is subject. You know how when a pain occurs in some section of the body it will work its way at last the whole length of a limb.

It scarcely seems possible for those who have been much and grievously deceived to keep their faith in God. The religious side of our natures suffers in sympathy with the natural. Yet God's character is on a higher plane than anything human, and you must trust Him. If you had been trained in a world of liars, if you had had Iscariot for your father, or Jael the wife of Heber for your mother, and Gehazi for your playfellow, you must still believe. For these words teach us that God's love only just begins where man's comes to an end. He will take up the exiles from human families and friendships. His love is large enough to give refuge to the branded and outcast Cain. When the help of flesh breaks down, His help always comes into view along the skyline. It remains for those who have alienated themselves from all human love. It stands apart from everything finite in its impressive grandeur. When all other love has withdrawn itself, it waits to show how unutterable and unparalleled is its patience.

What a picture of the perfect life is that here suggested to us! The natural is seen to pass into the spiritual stage without break or dislocation. The transfer from earthly into heavenly care is effected without a moment's desolation or exile. If we are not taken up by God at the parting of

the ways that is surely our own fault. God means His grace and help to perpetuate the tender ministries that hovered over the cradle. We ought never to know the wormwood and the gall of desolation. An orphanhood is no part of the plan of our lives. If, after the rest and blessedness of a happy childhood, we pass through an interregnum of pain, saying we are unloved, unnoticed, uncared for, that is not providential. I am afraid we do not rise to God's conception of the tranquil and believing life. We look back upon stretches of time, days and weeks and years that were overcast by a sense of orphanhood, and all the time we have had the message, "I will not leave you orphans—I will come to you." Whether it be so or not we thought we belonged to no one. We did not let God take us up when others put us down. We had to walk on till we were faint and weary before we could bring ourselves to the idea of resting in His sustaining arms. That temper, perhaps, rules us still. We are orphans, but sturdy, self-reliant, capable orphans who never whine or whimper at solitude or misfortune. We exhibit a rough, cheery independence, and are going to live for the rest of our days in the spirit of philosophers. Now we must put a limit to all that. We are fighting against a profound law of nature. We were made for trust and not for a self-depending

existence like God's. You can no more live in this atmosphere than a pale-faced European can work before the scorching engine furnaces in the latitude of the Red Sea. You were not made for it, and God will make you feel your helplessness. It is His will that you should never be without a sense of His Fatherhood. He has put within us the germ of both a natural and a spiritual faith. Those who care for us in our infancy we trust and love and follow as by a natural instinct. By and by the first home and its vitalising loves pass away. We are brought into a new and unknown world. We need to live by the power of a new principle. Faith in the Divine must come into play or we shall miserably perish. The fatherhood has been transferred to stronger hands. And it is upon this worthier object our faith must henceforth be fixed.

Printed by Morrison & Gibb Limited, *Edinburgh*

THEOLOGY LIBRARY
CLAREMONT, CALIF.

BY THE REV.

ALFRED PLUMMER, M.A., D.D.

AN EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY

ON THE

GOSPEL ACCORDING TO

S. MATTHEW

Demy 8vo. With full General and Greek Indices. Cloth Gilt, 12s.

"A work eminently suited to meet the needs of English readers, and which none can study without receiving profit and edification."—*Church Times.*

"Dr. Plummer's book will fill a void which all ordinary students have felt for years past. He has laid us all under a deep debt of gratitude for this masterly work, which will now become as much a standard work as his equally valuable book on the third Gospel."—Rev. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS in the *Churchman.*

"The most useful English work on St. Matthew that has appeared in our generation. It is exactly the book for which students have been waiting for many years. Indispensable to the student of the Gospels as the best 'Commentary,' on St. Matthew in the English language."—*Guardian.*

"It is a rich book, and full of matter that is most pertinent to its purpose, which is the interpretation of the first Gospel to the modern mind. Henceforth, Plummer on St. Matthew is likely to be consulted as often as Plummer on St. Luke, and that is very often indeed. In all questions of interpretation we shall always turn to it, and we shall often turn to it first of all."
Expository Times.

"Dr. Plummer's 'Commentary' is a masterly specimen, and is a masterpiece of its category."—*Homiletic Review.*

LONDON: ROBERT SCOTT, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.